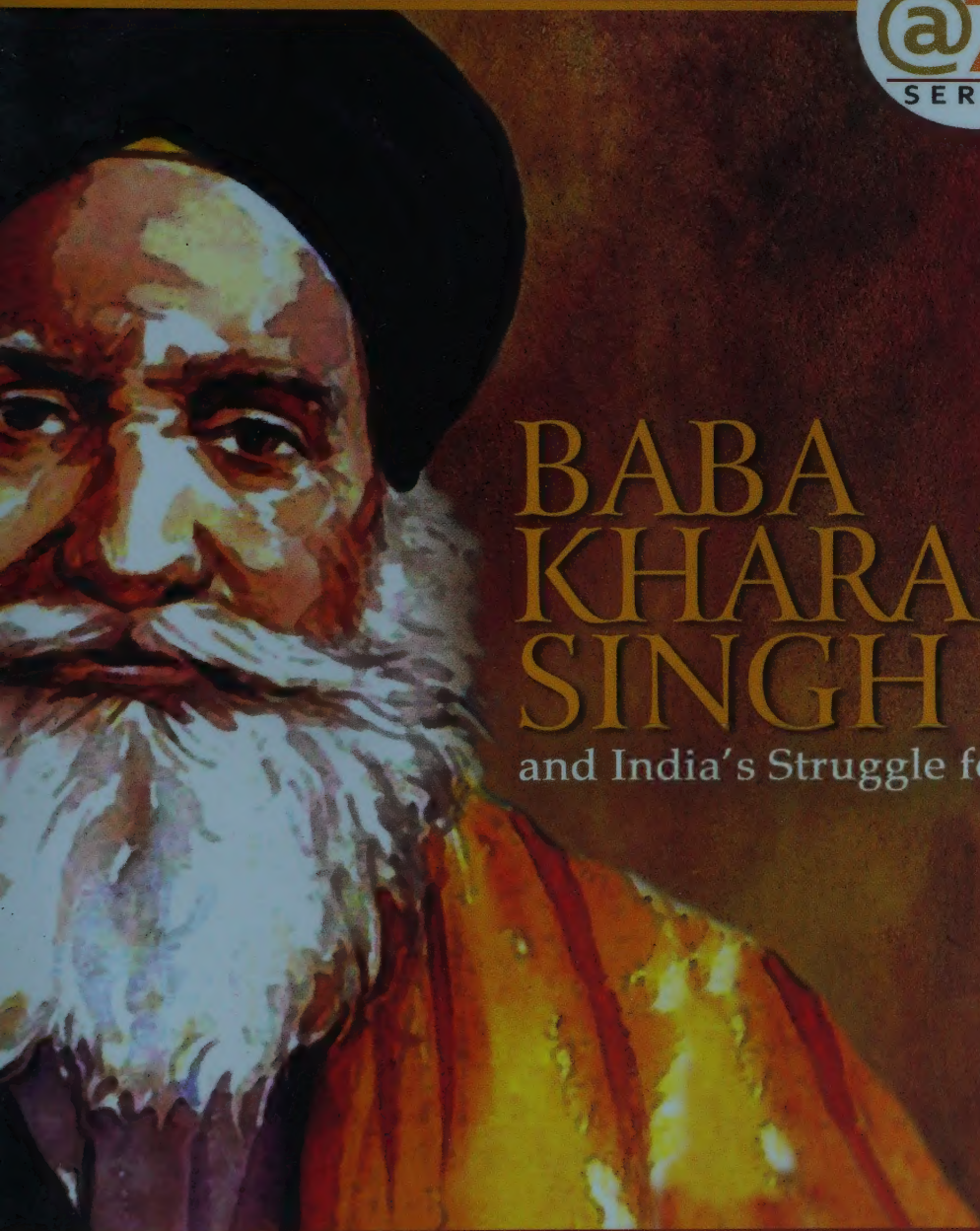
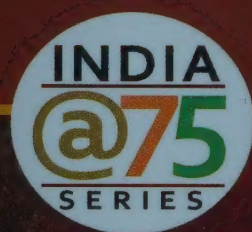


FREEDOM FIGHTERS



BABA KHARAK SINGH

and India's Struggle for Freedom

M O H I N D E R S I N G H



Baba Kharak Singh (1868-1963) was a political leader and an eminent freedom fighter in India's struggle for independence. He is considered a significant figure in bringing political consciousness to the Sikh community by bringing them into the national fold. Kharak Singh presided over the memorable session of the Central Sikh League held in 1920, Lahore, where under his direction the Sikhs took part in the All India Non-co-operation Movement. In 1922, he initiated one of the most successful agitations against the British Government, popularly known as the Keys Morcha. He directed a massive demonstration in 1928 when the Simon Commission visited Lahore. This book brings to light his journey of life as an extraordinary tale of dedication, commitment and loyalty towards the cause of freedom.



Baba Kharak Singh

and India's Struggle for Freedom

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Baba Kharak Singh

and India's Struggle for Freedom



Mohinder Singh



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To those
who fought for the liberation of the
Motherland

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In the fight for India's freedom if you find a bullet in my back do not count me as one amongst the Sikhs of the Gurus and do not cremate my dead body according to the Sikh rites. A disciple of the Great Gurus is an ideal saint-soldier and is supposed to fight in the vanguard and face the bullet in the chest and not in the back. We, the Sikhs, shall never allow any foreigner to rule our Motherland and we shall brook no injustice.

—*Kharak Singh*
(Excerpts from the speech delivered in Lahore
on the arrival of the Simon Commission)

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Preface

The Indian National Congress succeeded not only in liberating the country through non-violent struggle but also strengthened popular people's movements at regional and local level. The close cooperation between the Congress and the popular people's movements at the regional level greatly strengthened local roots of Indian nationalism. Consequently, popular leaders belonging to different communities and regions were drawn into India's struggle for independence. Although, a lot of literature has been produced on the Indian National Congress and leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and others, not much is known about regional movements and regional leaders in regions other than their own.

The National Book Trust, India has taken the welcome initiative of filling this gap by commissioning biographies of prominent national leaders who worked at the regional grassroots level. Among the nationalist Sikh leaders, Baba Kharak Singh was, perhaps, the only leader of eminence who remained steadfast and consistent both in his strong opposition to the British rule as well his staunch nationalism. With the inception of the Central Sikh League, an independent body formed to take care of the political concerns of the Sikhs at a time when Shiromani Akali Dal was busy in its battle for religious reform, Baba Kharak Singh provided a tangible example of separation of religion and politics in the Indian context.

A revised and updated version of the original account written during the Congress Centenary Celebration in 1985, this biography of Baba Kharak Singh depicts the life and times of this great son of India who was largely responsible for moulding the course of events in modern Panjab and inculcating nationalist and secular values in the regional politics. Baba Kharak Singh was the moving spirit behind the Central Sikh League, the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee. It was the vision and leadership of Baba Kharak Singh that led to the prelude of Sikh struggle for reform of historic shrines and culminated into a powerful movement against the government appointed

managers of the Gurudwaras on one hand and against the powerful British officials in the Panjab on the other.

Any endeavour to write about a man of Baba Kharak Singh's vision and stature would be incomplete without discussing the institutions that he helped build and nourish. Therefore, an attempt has been made in the present biography to discuss the milieu in which Babaji was born and brought up. The book also highlights the powerful movements he had launched and guided, the institutions that he had built and nourished and the developments which drew him and the Sikh community into the mainstream of Indian nationalism.

I hope this monograph will help our countrymen, particularly the younger generation, understand and appreciate the close cooperation and friendship that existed between the regional movements and the larger movement of country's struggle for freedom led by leaders like Baba Kharak Singh. I am grateful to Dr. Amrik Singh and Prof. Bipan Chandra for their help and guidance and the National Book Trust for publishing this biography of Baba Kharak Singh whose selfless sacrifice has been a source of strength to many regional and national leaders during India's struggle for freedom.

6 June, 2005

MOHINDER SINGH
National Institute of Panjab Studies
New Delhi

1

THE MILIEU

“There are a few hands which can uphold the honour and preserve the dignity of the national flag better than those of Babaji”, said Jawaharlal Nehru while presenting a silver replica of the national flag to Baba Kharak Singh at a function organized to celebrate his 82nd birthday in 1949. Before describing the life and times of Kharak Singh, who had earned the title of the ‘uncrowned king’ of the Sikh community, his dauntless courage, unparalleled sacrifice and unflinching faith in the freedom and unity of India, thus it will be relevant here to study his family background and the milieu which went into the making of this great son of India.

Kharak Singh was born on 6 June 1868 A.D. in Sialkot (now in Pakistan). His father, Sardar Hari Singh, had made a good name and fortune as a government

contractor and was ranked amongst the respected families of the undivided Panjab (now Punjab). Through his hard work and good relations with the British officials, Hari Singh became the Attorney in the Sialkot Commissariat and got the title of 'Rai Bahadur'. It is worth-mentioning that the young Kharak Singh was reluctant to possess the riches of his father or to cultivate the British officials and earn a title like him. On the contrary, he was the first among the Sikhs leaders to have openly come out against the British rule and was largely responsible for bringing the Sikh masses into the mainstream Indian nationalism.

It was this insight and initiative of Baba Kharak Singh that metamorphosed the Sikh struggle for renovation and reform of historic shrines and ended up as a powerful movement against the government appointed managers of the Gurudwaras on the one hand and against the powerful British officials in Panjab on the other.

After passing his Intermediate Examination from Murray College, Sialkot, Kharak Singh was sent to Lahore for higher studies. He was among the first batch of students who graduated from the newly established Panjab University at Lahore in 1889. His keen interest in Law took him to Allahabad, since there was no Law college in Panjab. However, due to the untimely death of his father and elder brother, he was compelled to return to Sialkot to look after the family business, leaving

studies halfway. Kharak Singh pursued his interest in reading especially philosophical and mystical literature. It was this interest which greatly influenced the young Kharak Singh's thinking and temperament. Instead of fostering the British officials and making his fortune, as was a common practice with the sons of the landed magnets then, Kharak Singh demonstrated a preference for working for the welfare of his countrymen. He pursued this by both organising and involving the Sikhs in the country's struggle for freedom.

Social and Political Milieu

After the defeat of the Sikhs in the two Anglo-Sikh wars (1844-45 and 1848-49), Panjab was annexed to the British empire by a proclamation of Lord Dalhousie in May, 1849. Thereafter, conscious efforts were made by the British officials, particularly the Lawrence brothers—John and Henry—to win back the Sikhs, who had not reconciled to their loss of political power. As the British succeeded in creating a group of supporters in Bengal by introducing Permanent Settlement and thereby creating a new landed class who had to support the Raj for their own vested interests, so also in Panjab the British succeeded in creating a landed class and declared them to be the 'natural leaders' of the Sikhs. The soldiers rendered jobless as a consequence of the downfall of the Sikh kingdom, were employed by the British in regiments created particularly for the Sikhs.

The Sikhs at large, were eulogized as a 'martial race' and the 'sword-arm' of India. The lands attached to Sikh shrines were restored and exempted from payment of land revenue. Efforts were also made to ensure direct or indirect control over the historic Sikh shrines and to use them as platforms to preach the myth of loyalty towards the Raj.

While the above measures greatly helped in reconciling the Sikhs, it would be wrong, as hitherto believed, that during the rising of 1857 and thereafter the Sikhs have been generally loyal to the British. This was another myth which was created and popularised by the British to keep Indians divided and to thus weaken the growing forces of Indian nationalism. In a well documented and well argued case, Dolores Domin, a German scholar, has successfully demolished this myth about the 'proverbial loyalty' of the Sikhs towards the Raj. By giving specific instances of the Sikh soldiers who revolted along with their other Indian compatriots, Dolores had removed the impression created by some of the British administrators and historians that Sikhs generally remained loyal to the British in the uprising of 1857.¹

Soon after the uprising of 1857, the Namdhari Sikhs, popularly known as the Kukas, rose against British Rule in Panjab. Inspired by Baba Ram Singh, they devised a plan to boycott British rule and to provide a preliminary organisational set up. By boycotting foreign goods,

railways, post-offices and other facilities associated with the British rule, the Kukas in Panjab heralded what subsequently came to be known as the Swadeshi Movement. The British Government checked the Kuka's uprising by arresting them and blowing off 56 of them at the cannon's mouth. Also their leader, Baba Ram Singh was deported to Burma.²

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of movements of social and political awakening in Panjab. The two powerful movements were the Arya Samaj Movement among the Hindus and the Singh Sabha Movement among the Sikhs. Since the leaders of the two movements called for social and religious reform and both condemned idol worship and wanted to provide modern education to the members of their respective communities, free from the influence of Christian Missionary Schools, the two worked in tandem in the beginning. We get an interesting piece of information through autobiographical account given by Bhagat Lakshman Singh. He recounted that Bhai Jawahar Singh, who was closely associated with the Singh Sabha Movement in Panjab, became the first secretary of the Arya Samaj in Lahore. But, this seems to have alarmed the bureaucracy in Panjab. Conditions were created whereby the two complimentary movements soon turned out to be the rivals in the province.

To check the growing political consciousness and feelings of nationalism in the Khalsa College, Amritsar,

the Panjab Government reconstituted the managing committee of the college so as to ensure better official control over its affairs. By this reconstruction, the Commissioner of the Lahore Division became ex-officio President of the management committee. The Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, the Director of Public Instructions, the Political Agent, Phulkian States and the European Principal became ex-officio members of the new managing committee. With all the members to be re-nominated and removed by the Government, the college virtually passed into official control. As a result, some of the earlier members of the committee and those teachers with nationalist penchant were forced to resign. This aroused the anger amongst the extremist Sikh leaders. Master Sunder Singh tried to kindle-up popular feelings by asserting that Khalsa College was no longer in the hands of the Sikhs. In an anti-British pamphlet entitled *Ki Khalsa Kalaj Sikhan da Hai?*, (Does the College belong to the Sikhs?) published in 1911, he accused the British Government of having robbed-off the Sikhs of their college, by gross breach of faith just as they had previously swallowed the Panjab. The pamphlet also denounced pro-British Sikh leaders like Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia as "traitors for their having brooked the official interference in the Khalsa College."³

The socio-religious movements among the Sikhs exposed the evils which had slowly crawled into Sikh social and religious life and indirectly inculcated in

them a desire for reform. The growing political unrest in the Panjab in the early twentieth century, the influence of the nationalist press and above all the growing forces of nationalism in the country further fuelled the unrest among the Sikhs and prepared the ground for the coming Akali struggle which was directed against the hereditary custodians of the Sikh shrines and British imperialism in Panjab.

Agrarian Unrest in the Panjab

Panjab's discontent with British rule, which had been felt even before the occupation of the Panjab by the British in 1849, found its first organised expression in the form of the 'agrarian unrest' of 1907. The trouble in the canal colonies, which was mainly agrarian in character, was the outcome of the deep-rooted economic and political discontent. It had found an outlet in the form of protests against the Colonisation Bill, which, apart from altering the earlier agreements made with the settlers about the ownership of land under the Act of 1893. It also provided higher rates of land revenue and irrigation. The agrarian unrest of 1907 was perhaps the first instance in the Panjab in which the rural masses, especially the Jat Sikh peasantry in the canal colonies, gave expression to their discontent against the policies of the British Government. The nationalist press in the Panjab and outside supported their cause and demanded withdrawal of the Bill. This occasion was also utilised

by the nationalist leaders in the Punjab including Lala Lajpat Rai, Ajit Singh and Syed Hyder Mirza to make the peasantry politically conscious.

Banke Dayal's popular Punjabi verses *Pagri Sambhal Oh Jatta, Pagri Sambhal Ohe* (Oh peasant, guard your turban — symbol of honour) reminded the Punjabi peasantry of its miserable economic conditions and exploitation at the hands of pro-British landed aristocracy and stirred them to action against the high-handedness of the British rule.⁴

The authorities in the Panjab strongly reacted against the agitators and their leaders, deporting both Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh. Later, when the higher authorities in Delhi realized that the measure had caused uneasiness among the Sikh soldiers, many of whom had families and relatives in the canal colonies, the Viceroy of India repealed the Colonisation Bill.

Although vetoing of the Bill and the reduction in land and water rates appeased popular agitation, the agrarian unrest exploded the myth of the loyalty of the Punjabis to the Raj and marked the beginning of political awakening in the province.

The Ghadarite Propaganda and Its Impact

The revolutionary Ghadar propaganda made major headway in the Panjab during the First World War. Punjabi emigrants to the U.S.A. were the largest component of the Ghadar movement. Sohan Singh

Bhakna was the founding President of the Association of Hindustani Workers of the Pacific Coast which subsequently became popular as the Ghadar Party because of its organisers' attempts to create Ghadar (rebellion) in India at the time of First World War. During the war, the Ghadarites made serious efforts to develop contacts with Indian soldiers, particularly the Sikh regiments in the Panjab. Some of the Ghadarite leaders set out for India in August 1914. They fixed 21st February, 1915 as the date for a simultaneous rising in the military cantonments of Peshawar, Ferozepur, Ambala, Faizabad and the other parts of Panjab. Their plans got disclosed to the authorities who were able to take timely measures and thus foil their schemes.⁵

The attempts of the Ghadarites to foster an uprising in India got defeated for a number of reasons: organisational weakness, lack of support from the masses and opposition from the pro-British landed interests among the Sikhs in the Panjab as well as Gandhi's and other nationalist leaders' disapproval of the Ghadarites' programme. Nevertheless, they were able to make a major contribution towards the articulation of discontentment against British rule by inspiring many people by their example of selfless sacrifice and through their patriotic and revolutionary propaganda.

Apart from instilling aversion for foreign rule, the Ghadarite activities also created a spirit of defiance of

authority among the extremists in the Panjab which later found expression in the form of the Babber Akali Jathas during the Akali struggle for Gurudwara reforms.

Post-War Discontent

The demolition of the boundary wall of Gurudwara Rakabganj in Delhi, the tragedy of Budge Budge, the demobilisation of Sikh soldiers after the war and the unsatisfactory treatment meted out to them during the war, further added to the uneasiness created by Ghadarite propaganda. The Sikh soldiers gained a sense of confidence nonetheless as a result of the repeated British propaganda about the 'superior martial qualities' of the Sikhs. Their adventures abroad during the war also broadened their outlook. Many of them who fought in West Asia and Western Europe came into contact with the nationalist propaganda regarding the maltreatment of Indians in Canada and the U.S.A because of their race and colour. They also comprehended the infamous conspiracy trials and the hanging and deportation of Sikhs and other Indians.

Both during the war and later, on their return to India, they learnt from their fellow villagers and relatives about the internment of nearly 5000 of their people for their alleged sympathy with the Ghadarites, of the enforcement of the Indent System under which every village was forced to provide a certain number of recruits and of the coercion to raise funds for the war.

On their demobilisation after the war, most of the Sikh soldiers returned to their native villages only to add to the growing woes of their people at home. Arbitrary cuts in the pension of these soldiers, their disappointment at the non-fulfilment of various promises of rewards made to them for loyal services during the war and other disabilities rendered these people utterly disillusioned and thus sowed the seeds of economic and political unrest in the province.

Rowlatt Bills and Subsequent Agitation in Panjab

In the above climate of depression and discontentment the Government of India added fuel to the fire by introducing the Rowlatt Bills in January, 1919. Mahatma Gandhi, who had earlier been leading the agitation against the Bills, gave a call for complete *hartal* to mark people's resentment and disapproval of the official measures. *Hartal* was observed in all the important towns of Panjab on 30 March and again on 6 April 1919. In Amritsar, Doctor Kitchlew and Satyapal took a leading part in organising the *hartal* in which people belonging to different classes took part. This communal harmony in Panjab combined with the fact of growing political discontent among the Sikhs, caused considerable concern in the official circles. As a result, the two leaders were quietly whisked away to Dharamsala. As soon as the news of their deportation reached people in the city, they assembled in a crowd and marched to the Deputy

Commissioner's bungalow to register their protest. The police tried to stop the demonstrators on the way and in trying to disperse them killed half a dozen people and wounded thirty. The action of the police infuriated people even more who retaliated by attacking European officials and civilians, and also official buildings in the city. In this riot, five Englishmen were killed and a female English missionary was assaulted. Disturbances occurred in many other parts of the province—Lahore, Kasur, Jallandhar and Multan being the important centres of unrest.⁶

Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy and Its Impact

This outburst of popular unrest created panic among British officials, who had so far banked on the myth of the 'loyalty of the Punjabis'. Two days after the happenings at Amritsar, Brigadier General R.E.H. Dyer arrived in Amritsar with troops and armoured cars. The next afternoon, when he marched his troops through the main streets of the city to astonish the masses, he found the people responding by shouting slogans of 'Hindu-Musalman ki jai' and 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai'. The General proclaimed a state of emergency in the city and declared all meetings and assemblies illegal. However, the local Congress Committee, which had already announced a meeting at the Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April, 1919, did not cancel the original programme. In addition to the people who had gone to attend the

Congress meeting, a large number of Sikh villagers, who had gone to the Golden Temple to celebrate Baisakhi and were unaware of the proclamation, also reached Jallianwala Bagh.

As soon as the General received the news of the meeting at Jallianwala Bagh, he marched with a platoon of infantry, 'to prevent', in his own words, 'further rebellious acts...' He occupied the only entrance and exit to the Bagh and without giving any warning to the people assembled there, opened fire, killing 379 and wounding over 2000 innocent people.⁷

While the country was busy in condemning this brutal action of Dyer and was engulfed in the wave of shock, horror and consternation, Arur Singh, the Government appointed *Sarbrah* of the Golden Temple, Amritsar, invited the General to the temple and tried to wash his bloodstains by honouring him with a *saropa* and by declaring him a 'Sikh'. The conversation that took place between Arur Singh and other priests of the Golden Temple and General Dyer then deserves mention here:

'Sahib', they said, 'you must become a Sikh even as Nikalseyan Sahib became a Sikh'.

The General thanked them for the honour, but he objected that he could not, as a British Officer, let his hair grow long.

Arur Singh laughed, 'We will let you off the long hair,' he said.

General Dyer offered another objection, 'But I cannot give up smoking'.

'That you must do', said Arur Singh.

'No' said the General, 'I am very sorry, but I cannot give up smoking.

The priest conceded, 'We will let you give it up gradually'.

'That I promise you', said the General, 'at the rate of one cigarette a year'.⁸

While the tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh lent an impetus to the country's struggle for independence, the perfidious and sacrilegious action of Arur Singh stirred the conscience of Sikh leaders. Baba Kharak Singh, Sardul Singh Caveeshar, Mangal Singh and others were convinced that it was no longer possible to protect the interests of the Sikh community through the servile methods of the Chief Khalsa Diwan and felt that the Sikhs needed a political organisation of their own to fight for their interests in close cooperation with the Indian National Congress and other nationalist forces in the country. It was this new urge that led to the formation of the Central Sikh League in 1919, a political organisation of nationalist Sikhs, which under the dynamic leadership of Baba Kharak Singh, became a powerful platform for radicalising Sikh politics and drawing the Sikhs into the mainstream of Indian nationalism. During their five years' struggle for reform

in the Sikh shrines (1920-25) the Sikhs succeeded not only in liberating their historic Gurudwaras but also in providing nationalist leadership to the community. It was not surprising to find the majority of the new Sikh leadership under the guidance of Baba Kharak Singh linking the movement of Gurudwara Reform with the larger movement of country's freedom.

Notes and References

1. For a detailed account see Dolores Domin, "Sikhs in the 1857 Uprising" in B.N. Pande (Ed.) *The Spirit of India: Volumes Presented to Shrimati Indira Gandhi*, Vol. II, pp. 283-9.
2. For a detailed account see Fauja Singh, *Kuka Movement*, Delhi, 1965.
3. The pamphlet was quickly proscribed by the British authorities but is available for consultation in P.I.B. Section of the British Museum, London, where I consulted this in 1975. However on going through Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia's biography recently published by the Khalsa College, Amritsar, one finds that the Sardar supported the new Committee only up to a limit and also resigned in protest when he felt that the official interference was destroying the autonomy of this premier Sikh institution. See Gurdev Singh Deol, *Sunder Singh Majithia*, Khalsa College, Amritsar, 1992, p. 38.
4. See for details, Sri Ram Sharma *The Punjab in Ferment*, Punjabi University, Patiala.
5. See for details Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation and Strategy*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1983.

6. Ravinder Kumar, *Essays in the Social History of Modern India* ('The Rowlatt Satyagraha in Lahore') pp. 148-212.
7. See for details, V.N. Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, Ludhiana, 1969.
8. Quoted in Ian Colvin, *Life of General Dyer*, London, 1931, p. 201.

2

KHARAK SINGH AND THE CENTRAL SIKH LEAGUE

It was during the Sikh Educational Conference of 1912 that Kharak Singh started his public life. During the Conference he was elected as the Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Fifth session which was to be held in Sialkot, his native town. Three years later in 1915, when a Conference was organised at Tarn Taran, the organisers invited him to preside over the Conference. After the Budge Budge Ghat¹ tragedy there were strong resentment amongst the Sikhs in Panjab that they would not accept any one with pro-British views to preside over the Conference. Baba Kharak Singh, who had by now earned the reputation of being a fearless critic of British rule, became the obvious choice.

It is interesting to note that even though he accepted the offer, he broke the old tradition of being carried to

the venue of the Conference in a *Baggi* drawn by six horses. A devout Sikh with great respect for the Sikh traditions, Baba Kharak Singh realised that going in a royal procession to Guru Arjan Dev's Darbar at Tarn Taran would not be in keeping with the Sikh spirit of humility. Accordingly, when he reached Tarn Taran railway station, he walked on foot to the venue of the Conference. Babaji's address to the Conference heralded a new era in the educational movement started by the pro-British leadership of the Chief Khalsa Diwan. During the course of his speech, he emphasized the need to inculcate social and moral values among the youth and exhorted them to come forward for the liberation of the motherland.

Though the Central Sikh League² came into existence in March, 1919, it was Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants, especially Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar, who transformed the character of the League and made it an effective platform for espousing the political interests of the Sikhs. For some time nationalist Sikhs had been thinking of raising a political platform to espouse the interest of the Sikh community. But it was the announcement of the Lucknow Pact in December 1916, which hastened the formation of the Central Sikh League. The Pact which was the result of a rapprochement between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, provided that (a) India should be raised from the status of a dependency to that of an equal partner

in the Empire as a self-governing dominion and (b) that the provincial legislative councils should consist of four-fifth elected and one-fifth nominated members. Further, while the Pact recognised the Muslim claim for separate electorate with a weightage of seats in excess of their proportion of population, it overlooked the interests of the Sikhs.

Evidently, the Congress leadership was trying to appease the Muslim leaders with a view to presenting an agreed solution to the British Government and thereby forcing it to concede India's right to self-rule. While doing so the Congress did not give much thought to Sikh interests, not only because they constituted a small minority in one of the eleven states but also lacked a political organisation of their own. The Chief Khalsa Diwan, which acted as the only spokesman of the Sikh interests till the formation of the Central Sikh League, was primarily a religious organisation and believed that the Sikhs could get constitutional concessions not by joining the Congress but by showing complete loyalty to the British.

Signing of the Lucknow Pact and the total disregard of Sikh interests therein convinced the emerging nationalist Sikh leadership that they would have to organise themselves to effectively espouse and safeguard the interests of their community. It was with this aim in mind that the Central Sikh League, a political body of the Sikhs, which was soon to be captured by the

extremist nationalist wing and to be used as a vehicle for fighting the British rule in close co-operation with the Congress, was floated and inaugurated on 30 March 1919 in Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore. The inauguration of the League was supported both by the nationalist Sikhs as well as those having close links with the larger movement for India's independence. The immediate realization that in the negotiations for constitutional concessions the community was being ignored for a lack of political body of their own prompted the nationalist Sikhs to launch the League. Equally important was the influence of the growing forces of nationalism in the country and its impact on the new Sikh leadership. It is interesting to note that the day of the inauguration of the Central Sikh League coincided with the day of the call for general *hartal* given by Mahatma Gandhi to register people's protest against the Rowlatt Bills. While no *hartal* took place at Lahore on the 30th, other important towns in Panjab such as Amritsar, Multan, Hoshiarpur, Ferozepur and Karnal favourably responded to Gandhi's call. In Lahore, however, considerable fervour and hectic preparations were undertaken for observing the *hartal* on 6 April. In this temper, when Lahore was preparing for a big *hartal*, the inaugural session of the Central Sikh League took place. While the promoters of the League could not take any major decisions at their very first session, they appointed a sub-committee to prepare a draft Constitution and submit the same for

adoption by the general meeting of the League to be held by the end of June, 1919.

While the sub-committee seems to have done the spade work—it not only prepared the Constitution, but also circulated printed copies of the draft among the registered members of the League—no regular meeting to adopt the Constitution could be held in June as originally decided. This happened because the people in the province, including the nationalist Sikh leaders, got involved with the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. It was the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Panjab that revived the hopes of nationalist Sikhs to take up the necessary follow up action with regard to the Central Sikh League. Soon after this visit some of the leading nationalist Sikhs expressed their opinion through a letter published in the Panjab nationalist daily *The Tribune* (29 October 1919) to activate the Sikh League and make it an effective vehicle for the Sikhs' contribution in the country's struggle for independence.³ It was in this zeal of hope and optimism that the promoters of the League decided to synchronise the first regular annual session of the League with the 24th Annual Session of the Indian National Congress to be held at Amritsar under the shadow of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy.

The intention of this announcement was to let the British authorities know the shift in Sikh politics. Though Gajjan Singh, a moderate Sikh leader, who had so vehemently argued the Sikh case for increased

representation in the Council, was elected to preside over the session, the overall change in the Sikhs' attitude towards the British Government was more than apparent. The new nationalist leadership comprised that section of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, which had by now got disillusioned with British policy towards Sikhs. This section of the Sikhs built a good rapport with the Indian National Congress and other nationalist forces in the country and was not prepared to argue the case on the lines of the previous pro-British leadership of the Chief Khalsa Diwan. A careful perusal of the membership of the first session of the League shows that though some of them had affiliations with the Chief Khalsa Diwan, they were nevertheless, cynical of their organisation's stand on various vital issues concerning the Sikh community for quite some time. In secret Government reports these leaders were described as members of the Tat Khalsa, a party of new Sikh radicals "thoroughly disloyal" and "irreconcilably hostile to the British Government".⁴

It seems that like other communities the Sikhs also could not escape growing nationalist influence and that it was natural for the new leadership to respond to the aspirations of the Sikh community. The tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh and the events which followed further underlined the need to present a strong and united front against British rule. Mahatma Gandhi, who had carried on successful agitation against the Rowlatt Bills and had by now emerged as an established leader of the

masses, made a popular appeal to the Sikh leadership. His standing by the Panjab during and after the martial law regime and the Congress decision to hold its annual session at Amritsar provided further fillip to the nationalist Sikh leadership to act in unison with the nationalist forces.

A careful perusal of the speeches and resolutions of the Amritsar session of the Central Sikh League shows that the primary concern of the new leadership was over what they believed to be inadequate Sikh representation in the Punjab Legislative Council under the 1919 Act. In his Welcome Address, Sant Singh referred to the changed political climate in the country in general and Panjab in particular, after the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. He emphasised that the new leadership was elected democratically compared to the pro-British Chief Khalsa Diwan, who were defined as 'natural leaders of the community'. He hoped that the future would justify the action they were taking. He also expressed confidence that Sardar Gajjan Singh, who had been elected President of the session would lead the Sikh community along the path of democracy.⁵ In his Presidential Address, Gajjan Singh said that the Central Sikh League's responsibility was great. "The world was under revolution and a new era for India was inaugurated by the announcement of the 20th August and rectified by the Joint Committee's report,"⁶ said Gajjan Singh. He explained in detail the salient

features of the Joint Committee Report, mentioning how the Indian Government would be gradually brought under the democratic control of the people. He touched upon the services rendered by the Sikhs to the British Government and quoted from official statements to that effect. While he expressed gratitude to the Government for the "special representation", he emphasised that it was "inadequate".⁷ The most important resolution of the Amritsar Conference was on the new Government of India Act of 1919. The League conceded that the Act was a substantial installment of reforms on the lines of the Declaration of 20 August 1917 and assured its hearty cooperation for the successful working thereof. However, the League recorded "its greatest disappointment and regrets that both in the provincial and the Central Legislatures the Sikh community had been denied adequate and substantial representation to which it was justly entitled by reasons alike of its political status and military achievements and its services and sacrifices for the King Emperor".⁸

Similarly, the other resolutions of the Central Sikh League in this session were also couched in cautious, if not moderate, language. On the plea that final reports of the Hunter Committee and the Congress had not yet published their findings, the League refrained from "expressing the condemnation of the activities of the officials and the methods adopted by them to deal with the situation in this province in April last in the language

which the occasion and the circumstances of the case demand". Even on Jallianwala Bagh, the resolution, while underlining the "atrocious and inhuman" nature of the massacre, trusted "that the government would take immediate action to satisfy the public."⁹

It seems that Central Sikh League at this stage appears to be modelling itself along the lines of the Muslim League. Like the Muslim League, the Central Sikh League also committed itself to the goal of self-government of India. Even while expressing its loyalty to the Crown it placed on record "its conviction that in the interest of good government and to ensure an adequate improvement in the condition of the people of India, it is essential that the country should be placed on a footing of equality with the self-governing members of the Empire and the people be allowed to work out their political, economic, industrial and educational salvation under the aegis of the crown". The League believed "that so long as this equality is not conceded, no satisfactory solution of the prevailing difficulties can be resolved".¹⁰ The Sikh League like its Muslim counterpart also demanded that "in the matter of Arms Act regulation, the Panjab should be placed on a footing of equality with other provinces" and "that licences should be issued to all Sikh applicants on demand saving those who may be persons of dangerous and doubtful character". It regretted the "very inadequate representation of the Sikhs in public services" and

strongly urged "the government to remove this cause of discontent in the community especially in view of the fact that duly qualified men are available in the community".

In another resolution the session of the League welcomed the inauguration of the practice of granting King's Commission to Indian subjects but deplored the meagre representation accorded to the Sikh community in the last selection of nominees for the King's Commission, urging that the Sikh representation should be in proportion to their numerical strength in the Indian army.¹¹ It also passed resolutions concerning religious demands of the community. It anticipated the Gurudwara Reform Movement in expressing "the strong conviction that the management and control of Sikh temples and endowments should no longer be withheld from the community itself, as imperatively called for in the best interest of these endowments and the Sikh Panth". The session also invited particular and urgent attention of the Panjab Government and the Government of India to the long standing grievances of the Sikh community that the administration of the Golden Temple at Amritsar was still carried on by a nominee of the Government and continued to be unresponsive to the wishes and sentiments of the *Panth*. The League was of the opinion that the foremost seat of Sikh faith should be placed in the hands of a representative body of the Sikhs constituted on an

elective basis and responsible for its action to the *Panth* at large.¹² This cautious approach of the new leadership of the Sikh community has been described by some scholars as 'apologetic communalism'.

Gajjan Singh and his friends attempted to deal with the Sikh aspirations in the changed circumstances. However, they failed to satisfy the Sikh community at large which had shown marked inclination for extreme nationalism after the tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh. As a result of changed political scenario, they found themselves out of step and slowly lost their grip on the leadership of the League. It was under these circumstances that Baba Kharak Singh, who had by now emerged as an undisputed leader with strong anti-British feelings and close affiliation with the Indian National Congress, appeared on the scene. The radical Sikh elements found that there was no better choice than Baba Kharak Singh to guide the destiny of the Sikh community at that critical juncture of their history. Accordingly, Baba was persuaded to assume leadership of the Sikh League.

The new leadership, in which Baba Kharak Singh occupied a pivotal position held differences from the old leadership in two ways. In the first place, most of them did not have an old association with the Chief Khalsa Diwan and therefore had no inhibition in resorting to agitational activities. Secondly, they were more interested in making common cause with the

Indian National Congress and the larger movement of non-cooperation then launched by Mahatma Gandhi. In this task, Baba Kharak Singh was greatly assisted by his lieutenant, Sardul Singh Caveeshar.¹³ Other nationalist leaders like Mangal Singh¹⁴ and the Jhabal brothers¹⁵ also rallied round Baba Kharak Singh in resolve to provide a nationalist tone to Sikh politics. Harchand Singh, who had provided leadership to the Sikh agriculturists in Lyallpur during the agrarian unrest of 1907 and was greatly responsible for building up popular public opinion in favour of an agitation over the demolition of the outer wall of Gurudwara Rakab Ganj, Delhi in 1914, also joined the nationalist Sikhs led by Baba Kharak Singh.

The attitude of the new leadership, which came to control the Central Sikh League, became clear from the brief speech that Baba Kharak Singh made at the inaugural session of the League at Amritsar. In the speech, Baba vehemently criticised the policies of the British Government in India and said that they had no right to exploit India in the name of peace and law and order. He made a fervent appeal to the Sikhs to join the progressive and nationalist forces in their resolve to free their motherland.¹⁶ The impact of his speech is obvious from the fact that no other speaker received as great an ovation as the 51-year-old Kharak Singh. The change in the policy of the Sikh League became evident when on 23 July 1921, the new leadership gave the League a

new and regular Constitution consisting of 26 Articles. The new Constitution spelt out the objectives of the organisation, detailed its constituents, laid down the eligibility criteria for its membership, described the modes of holding conferences and annual sessions, and laid out the manner in which it was to elect its office bearers. The most significant part of the Constitution was Article 1, which gave the two objectives of the organisation which obviously were an attempt to reconcile the League's participation in the Gurudwara Reform Movement and Non-cooperation Movement simultaneously. In fact the attainment of 'Swarajya' was given priority over their attainment of control of Sikh shrines.¹⁷ The Executive Council of the Sikh League was to consist of 101 members, with all ex-Presidents being ex-officio members of the Executive Council. In addition to the President, the League was to have a General Secretary and two Joint-Secretaries. It is interesting to note that while Baba Kharak Singh was elected President of the League, his trusted lieutenant Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar became the Joint Secretary.

After Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants officially took over the control of the Central Sikh League, it was decided to first formally join the movement of non-cooperation in the country. Mahatma Gandhi, who had given the call for non-cooperation on the Khilafat issue, thought of broadening the base of his struggle by including two fresh issues, i.e., rectifying the wrongs

done to Panjab and promising Swaraj within one year. By promising to get those punished, who were responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy and the subsequent martial law excesses, Gandhi was able to involve the Panjabis, who had not been very active in the Congress movement this far. The Sikhs, who obviously shared the general resentment in the Panjab caused by the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, had an additional grievance of their historic shrines being misused by the custodians appointed by the British officials.

It is interesting to note that the leaders of the Central Sikh League, most of whom were controlling the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, the Shiromani Akali Dal and the powerful struggle for Gurudwara reform then launched by the Akali leaders insisted all Sikhs to join the Gurudwara Reform Movement. It also supported the Congress programme of non-cooperation at the same time. One often noticed that those joining the Central Sikh League and the Akali struggle also joined and supported the Congress movement of non-cooperation. During this early phase of the Gurudwara Reform Movement, it was Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants who were instrumental in broadening the scope of the struggle for Gurudwara Reform by making common cause with the larger movement of non-cooperation in the country. It was Baba Kharak Singh's personal rapport with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and other

important leaders of the Congress that brought about close cooperation between the two movements.

During the second session of the Central Sikh League held at Lahore on 19 and 20 October 1921, there was only one major item on the Agenda—Akali reformers joining the movement of non-cooperation. Baba Kharak Singh, who presided over the session, was given a rousing welcome when he arrived at Lahore. In a huge procession he was taken through the main streets of the city. *The Tribune* reported the event thus: "The Khalsa has mustered strong to attend their first national assembly as such".¹⁸ The session, which opened at the Bradlaugh Hall, was attended by over a thousand delegates with over six thousand visitors. The proceedings were marked with great enthusiasm. Mahatma Gandhi, the Ali brothers—Mohammed Ali and Shaukat Ali—Maulana Azad and other Congress leaders specially came to attend this session. In addition, prominent Khilafat and Congress leaders from Panjab also joined the Sikh delegates at the session.

In a bold and frank speech Baba Kharak Singh emphasised the need for the Sikhs to join the mainstream of the nationalist politics. He began by emphasising the necessity for every citizen to take part in the national struggle. While making special appeal to the Sikhs, Kharak Singh emphasised that most of the problems of the Sikh community were the result of their non-participation in the nationalist politics. He continued:

When they do not participate in their country's management, they gradually get accosted to a life of political inferiority, a life which is worse than death. Political dependence is the root cause of social and moral vices, and makes men selfish, insincere, jealous of each other, liars and so on. Political dependence involves moral and spiritual degradation because it makes it impossible for the people to lead pure and upright lives.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that while strongly advocating that the Sikhs should join nationalist politics, Kharak Singh, at the same time, made out a case for weightage to the Sikhs in the Panjab Legislative Council and the Indian Legislative Assembly. The arguments that he used were quite similar to those which were earlier used by the Chief Khalsa Diwan. Such a stand was perhaps essential in seeking support from the masses and for the political survival of the Sikh League. The Baba argued that the appeals for weightage which were earlier made to the Government by the pro-British Sikh leadership should now be addressed to the Indian National Congress. He was clear in his mind that getting concessions for Sikh community through the Congress was better than getting them through the British. When asked why the Sikhs were ignored both by the Lucknow Pact and the scheme envisaged in the Minto-Morley Reforms, his reply was simple and straight-forward. He said:

The Sikhs had hitherto kept aloof from all political activities making no agitation and having all along been sacrificing their lives for the honour and prestige of the British empire out of all proportion to their numerical strength.¹⁹

He plainly announced that the Sikhs having lost all confidence in the despotic bureaucracy would now be getting their due by joining the political struggle and by fighting British rule along with other nationalist forces. It is interesting to note that Kharak Singh and other members of the Sikh League were finding it difficult to totally give up communal consideration while talking of the Sikh interests. In his speech, Baba Kharak Singh spelt the five Sikh demands as under:

- (i) one-third of the non-official seats in the Panjab Legislative Council;
- (ii) fifteen seats in the Central Legislative Assembly;
- (iii) eight seats in the Council of States;
- (iv) one-third of the posts in the Panjab Provincial Services and of all Civil employment in the province and
- (v) in other provinces too the same right or representation as has been conceded to the Mohammeden brothers.²⁰

To the criticism that he was putting forward extravagant demands, Baba replied that while the Sikhs do not want to be selfish they must have their due. He stated:

We as Sikhs do not want to touch others' due. Our Hindu and Mohammeden brothers by all means have their due, we want our own.²¹

However Baba Kharak Singh could not explain as to how the Sikhs could ask for 1/3 seats in the Panjab without depriving Hindu and Mohammeden communities of their share. This duality was perhaps giving birth to what has been earlier described as apologetic communalism of the Sikh League. While Baba could not give any valid reason for getting more share for the Sikhs than their due on the basis of numerical strength, he had to keep on hammering this argument to keep the Chief Khalsa Diwan leadership at bay. This, in fact, had been generally the stand of the Central Sikh League and even the Shiromani Akali Dal at the later stage during various parleys for transfer of power. No Sikh leader could convincingly argue the case for a separate state for Sikhs but all used this as an argument to counter the claims for separate state put forward by the Muslim League, while Baba Kharak Singh was occasionally compelled to talk of Sikh interests. A careful study of his political career shows that he was more concerned with the larger issue of the country's freedom than the smaller issues like reservations on communal lines. In the wake of growing communal feeling as a result of communal representation introduced by the Act of 1935, Baba

Kharak Singh was out-manoeuvred by those who gave precedent to communal interests over the larger nationalist interests.

While some of the national leaders, including some members of the Congress, were questioning the demand for Swarajya, it was Baba Kharak Singh, who threatened to part company with the Congress in case the latter agreed to any thing less than the 'Purna Swaraj' (Complete Independence). He objected to any one questioning the legitimate nature of the demand of Swarajya. In the course of his Presidential Address he said:

Who can question the reasonableness of the upper most and most prominent demand of the united India to have self-government? If they call in question the reasonableness of this desire by saying that we are not fit for self-rule, I emphatically deny it. We are, I affirm, as fit as any other nation on the face of the earth.²²

Kharak Singh dismissed the case of Indians being unfit for self-government because it was inhabited by people of different races and religions "who were presumably fighting against each other" as untenable. In the first place Hindus, Mohammedans, Christians, Parsis and Sikhs were "brothers" and the sacred name 'Indian' bound them into a united nation. Moreover, there was no more disunity in India than in England. "If they can with all their differences and division rule over

their country, why should we not with our differences be able to, rule over our country?"²³ In the course of his Address Kharak Singh emphasised that to the Sikhs non-cooperation should come very naturally. He said:

The Gurus suffered wrongs patiently and with perfect resignation but never budged a hair's breadth from truth and justice. That was passive resistance at its best. The Gurus had set notable examples for the Sikhs and they should follow in their footsteps and for good reason. When violence is not to be used, non-cooperation is the only alternative to fall back upon.²⁴

The plea made in the Presidential Address of Baba Kharak Singh greatly influenced the members of the Central Sikh League attending the session. A formal resolution in favour of non-cooperation was, thus, passed by the Sikh League in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders. Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar, who proposed the resolution and was in fact the spirit behind the success of the session, showed greater amount of sophistication in arguing for adoption of non-cooperation by the Central Sikh League. In his speech, which exhibited deep study of Sikh religion and world history, Caveeshar referred to the Sikhs' services to the *Raj* and the way they had been humiliated after the First World War and in the martial law days in Panjab. He also spelt out the programme of non-cooperation which was to be conducted on

strictly non-violent lines and repudiated the British suggestion that the Sikhs were a militant people and non-cooperation was not their final creed.²⁵

Sardar Caveeshar's resolution was seconded by Mangal Singh who was on his way to become the most important member of the League after Kharak Singh and Sardar Caveeshar himself. Mangal Singh had resigned an important position in the government service to take up the editorship of the *Akali*, and assist in the newly started English daily *Hindustan Times*, the newspapers started by the nationalist Sikh leaders to propagate the Gurudwara Reform and non-cooperation movements among the Sikhs. After the resolution was formally passed with an overwhelming majority, the Sikh League tried to prove its sincerity by demonstrating the efficacy of non-cooperation through the peaceful Akali struggle for Gurudwara reform which is discussed in the following Chapter. It was the bold leadership provided by Baba Kharak Singh which changed the course of events of Sikh politics. Dr. Saif-ud-Din Kitchlew, who attended the session along with other national leaders describes the crucial role played by Baba Kharak Singh thus:

I shall never forget the most historic session of the Sikh League that I witnessed with my own eyes, at Lahore, in 1920. The bold, courageous and statesmen-like lead given by Baba Kharak Singh carried the day and the Sikh Community, by an

overwhelming majority, passed the resolution on non-violent non-cooperation. Thus to Baba Kharak Singh goes the credit of bringing the Sikh community into the national fold.²⁶

Notes and References

1. Radha Kumud Mookerji (Ed.) *Baba Kharak Singh Abhinandan Granth*, p. 20.
2. For a detailed account of politics of the Central Sikh League see Sukhmani Bal, *Politics of the Central Sikh League*, pp. 1-41.
3. *The Tribune*, 29th October, 1919, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
4. D. Petrie. Secret C.I.D. Memorandum on "Some Recent Developments in Sikh Politics", reproduced in Ganda Singh (ed.) *The Panjab Past and Present*, October, 1970, pp. 301-79.
5. *The Tribune*, 30th December, 1919.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.* 24th January, 1920.
9. *Ibid.* 28th January, 1920.
10. Resolutions No. II and IV quoted in the *Tribune*, 28th January, 1920.
11. Resolution No. XIV, *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Born in 1866, Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar was the moving spirit behind the Central Sikh League, the Shiromani Akali Dal and other nationalist Sikh organisations. A fiery orator and a prolific writer, he was a close lieutenant of Baba Kharak Singh. It was he who

brought about a close liaison between the Congress and the Sikh leadership. For details of biographical account see Fauja Singh, *Eminent Freedom Fighters of Panjab*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1972, pp. 203-205.

14. Born in his ancestral village Gill, Ludhiana district, in 1896, Mangal Singh joined the government service as Tehsildar after graduating from the Khalsa College, Amritsar. During the Akali movement he gave up government service and took up editorship of the *Akali* and also assisted in the editing of the *Hindustan Times* then started by the Akali leadership. For details refer to his tape-recorded interview in the Oral History Cell of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
15. The three Jhabbal brothers – Amar Singh, Sarmukh Singh and Jaswant Singh – played an active role in the Central Sikh League and the Akali Dal. Amar Singh was born in 1892 and joined government service after completing his education but left the same to join the first *Shahidi Jatha* organised by Sardul Singh Caveeshar to repair the demolished wall of Gurudwara Rakab Ganj. Sarmukh Singh was member of the Central Sikh League, Shiromani Akali Dal and the S.G.P.C. Youngest of the three, Jaswant Singh was the Joint Secretary of the Lahore branch of the Central Sikh League.
16. Radha Kumud Mookerji (Ed.), *Baba Kharak Singh Abhinandan Granth*, pp. 183-84.
17. *The Tribune*, 23rd July, 1921.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Darshan Singh, *Ten Eminent Sikhs*, pp. 26.

3

THE GURUDWARA REFORM MOVEMENT

The Gurudwara Reform Movement, popularly known as the Akali Movement (1920-25) was a turning point both in the history of Panjab's struggle for freedom and also in the Sikhs' relations with the *Raj*. While the struggle had initially been launched for reforming Sikh shrines, a purely religious issue, it were the nationalist leaders like Baba Kharak Singh, who helped Akali leadership broaden the base of the religious struggle by launching a frontal attack on the Mahants and other pro-British interests in the Sikh shrines on the one hand, and their supporter, the British Government in the province, on the other. Mahatma Gandhi appropriately expressed this shift delivering a speech in the Golden Temple, " If the Sikhs strove to free the bigger Gurudwara—the Motherland, they could free their own shrines

without much ado." Under the changed programme, which received consent of Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress leaders, the Akali struggle for Gurudwara Reform became a synonym for the larger struggle for country's independence.

In the non-violent Akali agitation for Gurudwara Reform, the Congress leadership found a regional manifestation of the larger movement of non-cooperation launched by Mahatma Gandhi. It was during the Gurudwara Reform Movement that the Congress leadership came into contact with the Sikh masses and succeeded in carrying the Congress programme to rural Panjab. It was, moreover, the result of the Akali-Congress cooperation forged during the struggle that the two leaderships came closer to each other and the Sikhs became inextricably involved in Congress activities. In fact, there were two groups among the Sikh—(i) the Akali advocates of purely religious reform and (ii) the others, who looked upon the Gurudwara Reform only as a part of the larger programme of country's freedom remained united, until Baba Kharak Singh was in the driving seat of Akali politics. It was the captivating personality of Baba Kharak Singh that was greatly responsible in bringing a close liaison between the Central Sikh League, the Akali Dal and the Indian National Congress.

The Akali movement began with the Sikh reformers' anxiety to restore their Gurudwaras to original glory.

Sikh shrines were established by Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith as a centre of religious activities, social and moral discourses and institutions which provided food and shelter to the poor and needy. In the initial days, they were managed by pious persons who, following the advice of Guru Nanak, did not look upon the offerings as their personal property. They utilized the same for running free community kitchens and for other works of social welfare. But during the days of the persecution of the Sikhs at the hands of the Mughal Emperors and their governors in Panjab, control of the Sikh shrines passed on to the Udasi Mahants, though Sikhs did not affirm the five external symbols of Sikhism. Therefore, during the dark days when Sikhs were being persecuted, the Udasis carried on the management of the Sikh shrines quite well. However, increasing income in the Sikh shrines as a result of the endowment of large revenue-free jagirs by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other Sikh misaldars resulted in some of the Mahants and their *chelas* (disciples) misusing the sacred funds for their personal gains.

After the defeat of the Sikhs in the two Anglo-Sikh wars and annexation of Panjab to the British empire in 1849, the British Government took control of the Golden Temple and other shrines in Amritsar and used them to promote imperial interests. Under the new arrangement, the manager of the Golden Temple was appointed by the British Deputy Commissioner of

Amritsar and could be removed from his position by the appointing authority at will. It was not surprising therefore to find the government nominated priests often supporting the official policies. When some of the patriot Indians abroad decided to create unrest among the Indian soldiers thus giving impetus to rebellion popularly called as Ghadar, the manager of the Golden Temple described the Ghadarite heroes as *thugs* and called upon the Sikhs not to give any shelter to them. As mentioned earlier, a very audacious instance of the misuse of the Sikh shrines was that of General Dyer being invited to the Golden Temple and being declared a 'Sikh' after being 'honoured' with *Saropa*.

The perfidious and sacrilegious action of Arur Singh and other priests of the Golden Temple, greatly shocked Baba Kharak Singh and other Sikh leaders who were already unhappy with growing evil practices in the holy places. Rather than fighting legal battles to oust the corrupt Mahants, they thought the best thing was to launch peaceful agitation for the reform of their sacred places. The beginning of the agitation for reform was made by the local Akali Jathas in their respective areas. But soon after the two representative bodies of the Sikhs—the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee and the Shiromani Akali Dal came into existence with the four objectives, namely:

- (i) to bring the Sikh religious places under *Panthic* control and management;
- (ii) to do away with the permanent position of the Mahants, thus ending their irresponsibility;
- (iii) to utilize the property and income of the Gurudwaras for the purposes for which they were founded, and
- (iv) to practise the Sikh religion according to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus as preserved in the *Adi Granth*.²

In the course of their five-years struggle (1920-25) these two bodies were not only able to obtain control over all the historic Sikh shrines through peaceful agitation and passive suffering, but also to strengthen the forces of nationalism in Panjab by obliterating the Mahants, the Government-appointed managers and other vested interests in the Sikh community.

It was a pleasant coincidence that the first Gurudwara to be reformed through peaceful agitation was Baba Di Ber, Sialkot, the home town of Baba Kharak Singh. When Harnam Singh, the Mahant of this Gurudwara died, his widow got her minor son appointed as successor under the guardianship of Ganda Singh, the Honorary Magistrate. There was a wave of resentment among the Sikhs. Under the leadership of Baba Kharak Singh, they organized themselves to liberate this shrine from indirect official control. They started weekly, and later daily, worshipping and other services in the Gurudwara

and restored the system of free community Kitchen (*langar*) which had been stopped by the newly appointed minor Mahant. In spite of various obstacles put by the guardian of the minor Mahant, the Sikh reformers succeeded in taking control of the shrine and appointed a popularly elected committee for its management. This was the first major victory for the Sikh reformers which greatly inspired Baba Kharak Singh, who resolved to dedicate the rest of his life to the service of his country. In the meantime, some significant developments at the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht shifted the scene of the activities of the Sikh reformers from Sialkot to the premier centres of Sikh religious and political activities at Amritsar.

Even before the launching of the Gurudwara Reform Movement, growing evil practices at the Golden Temple and the Akal Takhat, and official control over their management had been a source of great discontent among the Sikhs. While the reformers were anxious to free their central religious place from the control of corrupt Mahants as early as possible, the authorities in Panjab resisted any change in disturbing the status quo. The nationalist press, particularly the vernacular papers in Panjab, played a positive role in highlighting the evil practices in the Golden Temple and in creating awareness among the Sikhs for reform. The Government in the Panjab tried to soft-pedal the issue by issuing a communique in July 1920 stating that the question of

Gurudwara reform shall be taken up after the elections to the Panjab Legislative Council. However, this failed to satisfy the aspirations of the Sikh reformers who continued to demand improvements in the management of their shrines. While a tug of war between the Government appointed priests and the nationalist Sikhs supported by the Indian National Congress was going on, new developments virtually brought the Golden Temple and the Akal Takhat under the control of the reformers.³

Soon after the reform of the Golden Temple, Amritsar, Panja Sahib, and Darbar Sahib, Tarn Taran also came under control of the reformers. However, it was the tragedy at Nankana⁴, in which over 150 innocent Sikh reformers were killed by the mercenaries hired by Mahant Narain Dass, brought a major change in the earlier programme of the Akali reformers and compelled them to launch a frontal attack on the bureaucracy which had been tacitly backing the vested interests in the Sikh shrines. Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants, Sardul Singh Caveeshar and Mangal Singh, were greatly instrumental in bringing about this change. They not only succeeded in bringing compatibility between the Shiromani Akali Dal, Central Sikh League and the Indian National Congress but also convinced the Sikhs that the reform in the Sikh shrines was not possible till the Government in Panjab was compelled to give up their support to the Mahants. They argued that there was a

need to launch a larger struggle by joining the country-wide movement of non-cooperation. Under the new programme, which received approbation of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and other important national leaders, the Akali struggle against a foreign government became synonym for struggle for reform in Sikh shrines. The Akali agitation over the Keys' Affair, during which Baba Kharak Singh emerged as the national hero, is an important manifestation of a popular movement in Panjab backed by nationalist forces in the rest of the country.

The Keys' Affair

The Golden Temple, the Akal Takhat and the adjoining Gurudwaras at Amritsar had passed unto the control of the reformers in October, 1920. Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia, the Government-appointed Manager of the Golden Temple, was also holding the office of Secretary of the new committee of management appointed by the S.G.P.C. Realizing the force of public opinion, he decided to fall in line with the party of reform. Though the S.G.P.C. and the Committee appointed by it virtually controlled the affairs of the Golden Temple, the fact that the keys of the *Toshakhana* (treasury on the top of entrance gate containing valuables and relics) were still in the possession of a Government-appointed Manager, gave the reformers a feeling of continued official control over the Gurudwara. At its meeting held on 29 October

1921, the Executive Committee of the S.G.P.C. asked Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia to hand over the keys to Sardar Kharak Singh, the newly elected President of the S.G.P.C. Even before the resolution was made public, the news reached the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, who decided to forestall the manoeuvre by immediately sending Lala Amar Nath, an Extra Assistant Commissioner, accompanied by a police party to Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia and took away the keys from him.

The Akali reaction to the taking over of the keys manifested itself in the form of protest meetings in Amritsar and other places in Panjab. The Government of India tried to curb the growing movement of non-cooperation among the Sikhs by prosecuting Kharak Singh and other non-cooperators among the Akali leadership.

The official action of arresting Akali leaders and awarding them rigorous sentences and fines greatly added to the popularity of the movement. Since the movement of non-cooperation was already on and the Hindus and Muslims had already rallied behind under the banner of Mahatma Gandhi, the Government thought of checking the Sikhs from swelling their ranks by devising some method to get out of the *impasse*. Along with the suppression of the popular movement it also tried to solve the issue by appointing a committee of some moderate Sikhs and handing over the keys to

them. But in the face of determined opposition from the Sikh masses even the moderates refused to accept the official offer. This put the Government in Panjab in a real dilemma which has been very aptly described by Mahatma Gandhi in the following words:

If it releases the Sikhs it would be ridiculed and the strength of the Sikhs will increase two-fold. If it does not release them their strength will increase ten-fold. It must, therefore, decide whether it should be wiser for it to allow the Sikhs' strength to increase ten times or to release the Sikh prisoners and be laughed at taking consolation in the fact that the strength of Sikhs will then be doubled.⁵

It is interesting to note that the Government followed the first course of action by immediately handing over the keys of the *Toshakhana* to Baba Kharak Singh and by ordering unconditional release of all the prisoners arrested in connection with the keys' affair. However, the unconditional release of the Akali prisoners did not satisfy Baba Kharak Singh who insisted that Pandit Dina Nath, President of the District Congress Committee, Ajnala, and other Congress workers, who had been arrested alongwith the Akali volunteers, should also be simultaneously released. Here again the Government had to yield to Baba Kharak Singh by ordering the release of Pandit Dina Nath and other Congress workers as well. However, even after securing the unconditional

release of the Akali and Congress volunteers, Baba Kharak Singh refused to go and collect the keys from the District Magistrate, a gazetted officer of the Panjab Government was sent to deliver the same to him at a *Diwan* specially arranged for the purpose.

The unconditional release of the Akali prisoners and return of the keys to Baba Kharak Singh was described by a contemporary European writer in the following manner:

Never was there a more shameful defeat. One thinks irresistibly of the capture of Calais by an English King when the leading citizens had to bring the keys to him clothed only in their shirts and with ropes round their necks... The Panjab Government had humbled itself to the dust before the Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee...⁶

The defeat of the Government was viewed by the nationalist leaders in the country, who had been backing the Akalis in their struggle against the bureaucracy, as a decisive victory for the forces of nationalism. Mahatma Gandhi sent the following telegram to Baba Kharak Singh:

'FIRST BATTLE FOR INDIA'S FREEDOM WON.
CONGRATULATIONS'.⁷

In its anxiety not to alienate the Sikhs any further or to allow their movement to gain momentum as a result

of repressive measures, the Government seems to have made a virtual surrender to the Akalis. In the changed situation, actions of the leaders were explained away as due to 'excitement based on the action taken by the Government in respect of the Darbar Sahib rather than due to a desire to join in any campaign of disobedience to law'.⁸ In the light of the statements of Baba Kharak Singh and other non-cooperators, the changed official version appears rather ridiculous. These leaders had more than once proclaimed that 'they were non-cooperators and were not prepared to offer any defence as they had no regard for a foreign Government, its Courts and the law'.⁹ The extract from Baba Kharak Singh's statement in the Court makes this stand crystal clear:

As the Government is a party to this prosecution and the Judge is one of its servants, I, therefore, do not wish to make any statement. My position as President of the Sikh Panth is like that of the Presidents of the United States, France and Germany.¹⁰

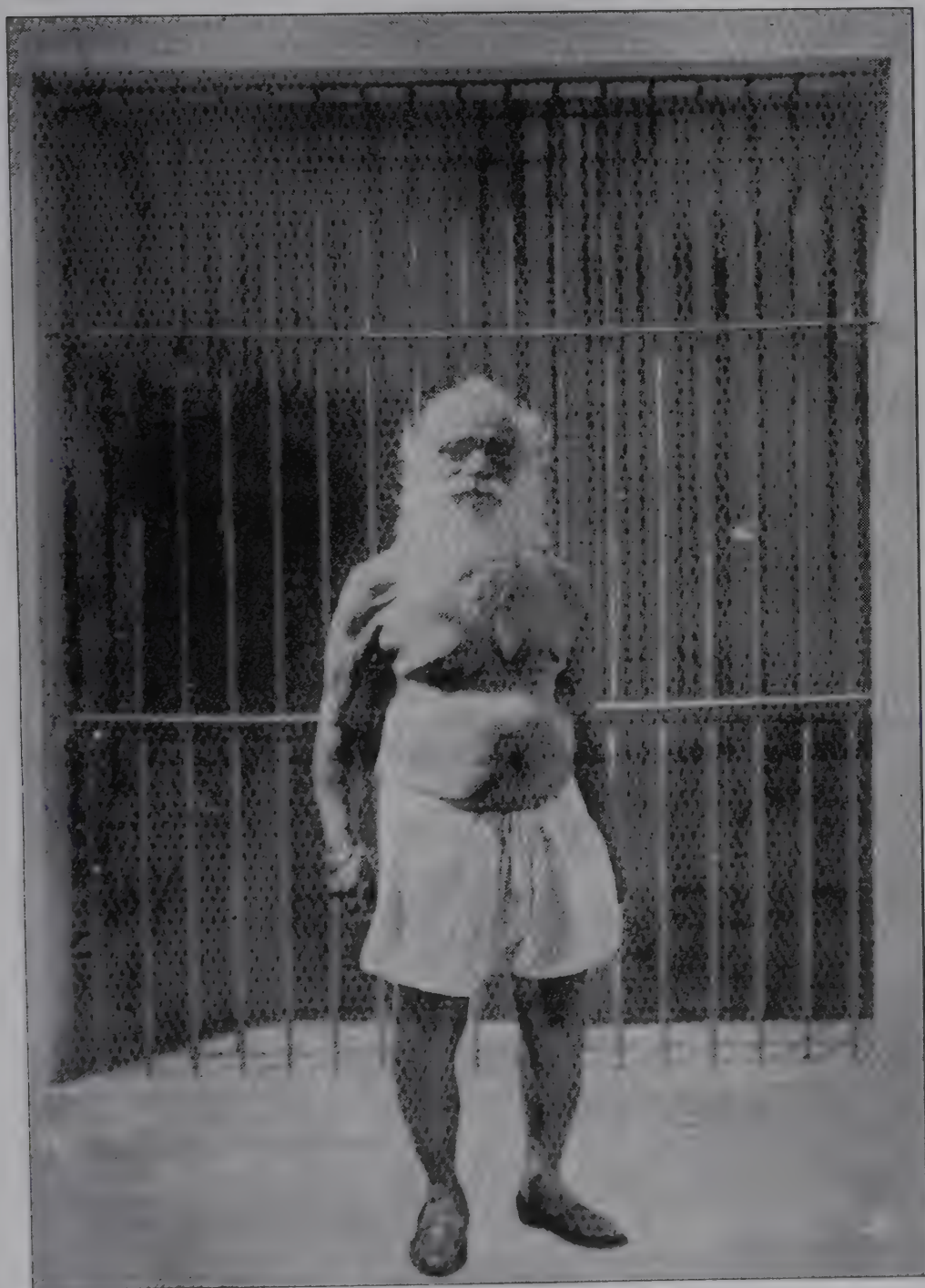
That the whole Sikh community was expressing its contempt for foreign rule through its struggle for the reform of Gurudwaras is borne out by the statements of other Akali non-cooperators as well. Perusal of these statements shows that anti-British feelings dominated the political scene in those days. In the course of



Baba Di Ber, the historic Gurudwara at Sialkot (now in Pakistan) from where Baba Kharak Singh started his 'Gurudwara Sudhar Lehar' (Gurudwara Reform Movement).



The Akali Jatha marching towards Guru Ke Baag (Photo by Sir James Dunot, London)



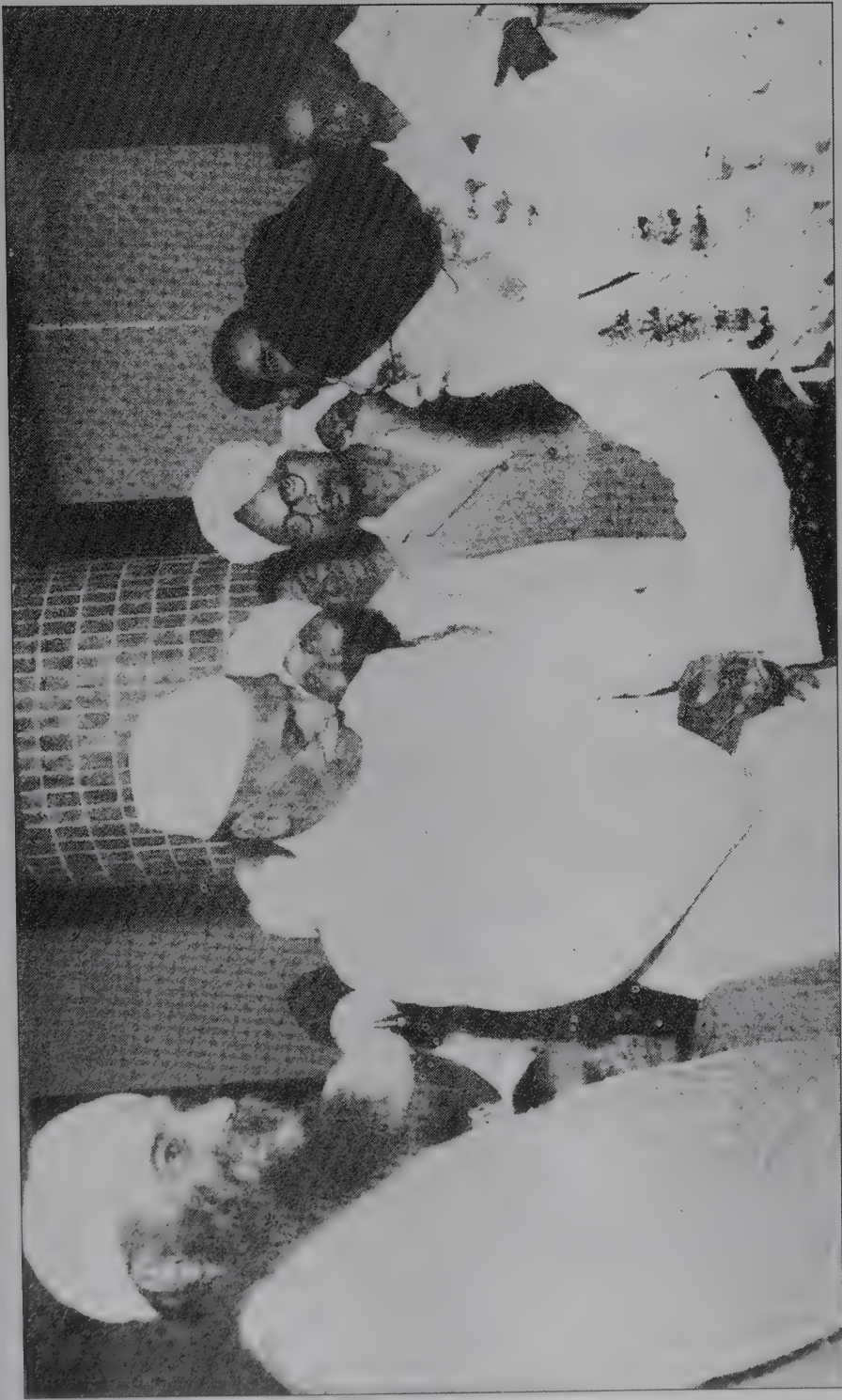
Baba Kharak Singh in the Dera Ghazi Khan jail during the winters of 1925-26.



Baba Kharak Singh presenting Saropa (Rope of Honour) to Pandit Nehru on his 59th birthday on 14th November 1948.



Baba Kharak Singh with Pandit Nehru and Kitchlew at a function held on 14th August 1950.



Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India, greeting Baba Kharak Singh on his 85th birthday.



Baba Kharak Singh with members of his family.



Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma, the then President of India, garlanding Baba Kharak Singh's portrait during a function organised to mark Baba's 125th birth anniversary on 6 June 1993.



A picture of Baba Kharak Singh

their statements in the Court, these leaders made the following significant remarks:

I have no regards for the present Government, nor do I consider these Courts as places of justice as they belong to a Government which is mad under the intoxication of power..(Dan Singh)¹¹

Sardar Dan Singh had the courage to tell the judicial authorities that the justice administered in the Courts was arbitrary when he stated at the end of the above mentioned statement ‘...announce to us the sentence which you have already decided in the club a day earlier’.¹² It seems that in administering justice, the judiciary was merely implementing the predetermined decisions of the executive based on political expediency.

It was this spirit of defiance of the British rule that was working behind the movement of Gurudwara reform led by Baba Kharak Singh. The statements reveal how the awe of the constituted authority, its officials, judges and police had disappeared from the minds of the people in the province. The government’s attempt to win back the Baba failed. The hope expressed in the communique that ‘the cordial relations’ which have hitherto been maintained between the Government and the Sikhs may continue uninterrupted for the perpetual benefit of the Government and the community’, proved a far cry. Professions of ‘goodwill and friendliness’ could no longer lure Kharak Singh and other Akali

leaders who had travelled a long way from 'unfailing loyalty' to open defiance of authority'. Baba Kharak Singh succeeded in awakening the Sikh community from its slumber. Sikh religious places could no longer be misused either for the pleasure and profits of the Mahants or for strengthening the hands of a foreign Government. No *saropas* could now be offered to the Prince of Wales during his first visit to India and no prayers held for his well-being. Even his scheduled visit to Amritsar in February 1922, had to be cancelled and the reception arranged in his honour at Lahore and other places were boycotted by the Sikh community.¹³

The emergence of Baba Kharak Singh, die-hard nationalist and a non-cooperator, as the leader of the Sikh community greatly worried the authorities in Panjab. Unconditional release of the Akali and the Congress volunteers in Panjab presented an interesting contrast. While in the rest of the country the Government was using all force to check the non-cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi, in Panjab it had no option except to yield to Baba Kharak Singh in order to dissuade the Sikhs from joining the main-stream of Indian nationalism. But, when it noticed that the unconditional release of the prisoners had instead of isolating the Sikhs from the Congress, further strengthened the bonds of unity between the two, it thought of suppressing the Sikh movement by use of force and thus setting an example before the national forces. This led to another

confrontation at Guru Ka Bagh. It is interesting to note that in the second trial of strength, Baba Kharak Singh and other Akali leaders also emerged victorious despite the fact that by this time the Akali leaders did not have the active support of Mahatma Gandhi because of his having been put behind the bars and the violent incidents at Chauri Chaura and the subsequent suspension of the movement of non-cooperation in the country.

After the arrest of Lala Lajpat Rai and Aga Mohamad Safdar, leaders of the non-cooperation in Panjab in February 1922, the Panjab Provincial Congress Committee decided to elect Baba Kharak Singh as its President to lead the congress party in the province. At such a crucial juncture when the Congress was being attacked from all quarters, accepting its presidentship required real courage. Baba Kharak Singh, who had by now well established his reputation as a fearless and popular leader in the province, accepted this offer without any reservation. Mahatma Gandhi greatly admired Babaji's courage and expressed his happiness and satisfaction through a message sent from jail:

In selecting Sardar Kharak Singh as the successor to Aga Mohamad Safdar as President of the Provincial Congress Committee, the Congress Committee has made an excellent choice. It could not have done better. In honouring Sardar Sahab the Committee has honoured itself. The election of Sardar Kharak Singh is also a delicate compliment paid to the Sikhs

for their bravery, sacrifice and patriotism. Nowadays the office of President of a Congress Committee is no sinecure. Prosecution for some offence or another under the ordinary or extraordinary laws imposed by the Government upon the people of India almost follows as a matter of course in many provinces. I congratulate Sardar Kharak Singh, therefore, upon his courage in taking up the reins of office at this stormy period of the nation's career.¹⁵

The Government in Panjab again tried to woo Baba Kharak Singh by suggesting through feelers that it was prepared to settle the Sikh Gurudwara issue with Babaji if he agreed to leave the Congress. A man of strong will and strict principles as he was, he would never betray the Congress. As a President of the Panjab Congress Committee, Baba Kharak Singh did a wonderful job by moving from one place to another and by telling the people how the bureaucracy was trying to divide them in the name of religion in order to weaken the nationalist struggle. For instance, when Kharak Singh was addressing a gathering at Jaranwala in the Lyallpur Distt. (now in Pakistan), the Government sent a police party in order to intimidate the audience. When Babaji noticed some people dispersing from the venue of the meeting, he boldly told the audience:

Brothers and sisters, take no notice of the police sepoy's sent by the bureaucracy's agents. The days of the British

Government in India are numbered and one day we shall be the masters of our own land. Why should we be afraid of anything when what we do and say is right? If the Government thinks that they can cow us down with a show of armed force, I am here to tell them that they are sadly mistaken. As long as I am addressing the meeting, no one should feel scared. First of all the bullet shall pierce my chest before it hits anyone else. Then why could you run away from the meeting.¹⁶

Baba Kharak Singh's speech electrified the audience and as a result many Sikhs from the District of Lyallpur joined Indian National Congress. This was the period of Baba Kharak Singh's ascendancy both in the Akali politics as well as the Congress hierarchy. It was from this position of strength that Baba Kharak Singh gave a new direction to the Sikh community and changed the course of events of the future history of the Sikhs by irretrievably involving them in the nationalist politics.

On finding that Baba Kharak Singh had not only succeeded in strengthening the bonds of friendship between the Sikhs and the Indian National Congress but his activities had also strengthened the movement of non-cooperation in Panjab, the authorities arrested him and sentenced him to five years' imprisonment. He was sent to Dera Ghazi Khan Jail, where he was given a special class befitting his position while his compatriots were sent to ordinary cells. Babaji refused to accept any special status as a prisoner, which he thought, was a

clever political manoeuvre to create a split among the Congress and the Sikhs by putting up classifications in the jail. Babaji's refusal to accept any special treatment in the jail made the authorities realize that he was quite a difficult person to handle. The Government tried another method of isolating him from the Congress prisoners by imposing a ban on the wearing of black turban and Gandhi caps.

According to a contemporary of Baba Kharak Singh, about 40 persons in the Dera Ghazi Khan Jail including the veteran Frontier Gandhi, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, decided to defy the ban imposed by the Government. This enraged the Jail Superintendent who forcibly removed the black turban from the head of Baba Kharak Singh. However, this did not in any way dampen the defiant spirit of the Baba, who, as a mark of protest against the removal of the turban discarded all his clothes except his *kachha* (short breeches). He declared that he will not wear his clothes till the Government lifted the ban on the wearing of black turban and Gandhi cap. In his resolve he was supported by other inmates of the Jail. Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who shared prison experience with Baba Kharak Singh, became a great admirer of the Baba on knowing that he was a man of great principles and determination. In his autobiography, the Frontier Gandhi thus describes the unique qualities of Baba Kharak Singh:

Kharak Singh was a very powerful man, firm and immovable like a mountain. No body could order him about. In spite of all the sufferings, he never lost his courage and determination.¹⁷

The Government tried to isolate the Baba by allowing him to wear the black turban but refusing to remove the ban on the Gandhi cap. As a protest against this policy of divide and rule, Baba Kharak Singh decided to remain without clothes except his *Kachha* in the cold climate of Dera Ghazi Khan. This consistent support to the Congress cause and Baba Kharak Singh's refusal to fall into the British trap greatly impressed the Congress leadership. Noticing that the cold climate was damaging Babaji's health the Panjab Provincial Congress Committee sent a letter to him in the jail saying:

We fully appreciate your stand and we think that your cause is just. But unfortunately the Congress in the Panjab has grown weak due to communal disunity and riots. As such we are unable to launch a campaign in support of your legitimate cause. We do not want you to suffer unnecessarily. We, therefore, humbly suggest you to give up your agitation in jail and put on clothes.¹⁸

But Babaji refused to budge an inch from the position he had taken and replied to their letter as under:

I have come to jail as President of the Panjab Congress and I am here to raise the prestige of this great organization. The Congress admits that my cause is just. It says that

since it has gone weak it cannot fight effectively for my cause and, therefore, it has suggested to me and to my colleagues to give up the agitation for the removal of the ban of Gandhi cap. As long as I am convinced that my demand is just I do not care a bit whether or not I get the support of others. I respect the Congress and the opinion of my colleagues but higher than all else is the voice of truth within which urges me to carry on my agitation. I have, therefore, finally decided to fight alone, come what may. I assure the Congress that my fight shall bring honour to its cause and my example will infuse courage in my people who have gone weak because of the sinister and ugly machination of our enemies. My decision is irrevocable and with faith in Providence I am confident that I shall win.¹⁹

Baba Kharak Singh's earlier statement before the Magistrate when he was arrested in connection with the Keys affair and his recent stand on the issue of black turban and Gandhi cap make it very clear that he was a man of strong determination and could not be isolated from Congress and the nationalist cause by the bureaucratic devices. While the British officials were trying to weaken the Indian National Congress after the suspension of non-cooperation movement and arrest of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and others, it were men like Baba Kharak Singh who, through personal example of selfless suffering, did not allow the Congress cause in Panjab to be betrayed.

To many of Babaji's companions in the jail, the issue of ban on Gandhi cap appeared to be a trivial matter and they gradually gave up their agitation in this regard. For Baba Kharak Singh, this was a matter that involved moral principles. Most of the jail inmates thought it was too trivial an issue to agitate upon. Therefore, they wanted not to press the issue. However, unmindful of the support from fellow prisoners, Babaji continued his agitation and in the process he was given another term of nine months for defying the jail rules. Even the supply of milk, which was being made to him, on medical grounds, was stopped. The Frontier Gandhi was so moved by the steadfastness of Babaji that he became Babaji's great admirer and during jail days quietly passed on his share of milk to Babaji through a hole in the wall.²⁰ When even after the expiry of his extended term of imprisonment Baba Kharak Singh did not give up the agitation for removal of ban on Gandhi cap, he was sentenced to a further term of eleven months.

Finding that persuasions, cajolery and canvassing did not work on iron-willed Baba, Sir John Maynard, the Home Member of the Panjab Government, went personally to the Dera Ghazi Khan Jail in 1925 and requested Kharak Singh to put on clothes since the Government had allowed him to wear the black turban. "I will not put on clothes until the Government remove the ban on the wearing of Gandhi caps by my fellow

prisoners," replied Baba Kharak Singh.²¹ Sir John Maynard said, "The Congress has grown weak in the Panjab and nobody worries about it any longer. The national movement is dead. Why should you rot in jail?" "It is absurd to think that great movements can ever die", replied Baba Kharak Singh. "It does not matter if the Congress has been weakened by the repressive policy of the British Government but as long as I am living and feel as strong as ever I shall not go back on my words. I will not give up my agitation until and unless the Government withdraws the ban on Gandhi cap and expresses regret for its stupidity".²² This is a rare example of determination and sacrifice for the cause which very few of his contemporary leaders possessed.

While Baba Kharak Singh was still languishing in jail, the Akali leadership continued its struggle against the Mahants and the Government in Panjab. The Guruka-Bagh Morcha, which resulted from Government's anxiety to suppress the Akalis at a time when the movement was leaderless as a result of arrest of important Congress and Akali leaders, also resulted in the triumph of the Akali leadership. The Government was again forced to unconditionally release the Akalis and allow them to cut wood for use in the community kitchen. Encouraged by the success in the initial struggle, the Akali leadership launched another agitation for the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha to his throne.²³ The Akali agitation took a serious turn

when, on 21 February 1924, the police opened fire to disburse members of a *Shahidi Jatha* on their way to Gurudwara Tibbi Sahib at Gangsar, Jaito, resulting in the death of some volunteers including women and children. The incident provided fresh fillip to the Akali agitation.

The Indian National Congress, which earlier met in Delhi at a special session in September 1923, passed a resolution supporting the Akali agitation in the Sikh State of Nabha. It further decided to send Jawaharlal Nehru, A.T. Gidwani and K. Santhanam to get first-hand information about the developments there. As soon as Nehru and his companions reached Nabha territory they were arrested and put behind the bars. In his autobiography, Nehru gives a very interesting account of his experiences in the Nabha Jail.²⁴ It was here that he discovered that the things in princely states, where word of the ruler was the only law, were worse than British-ruled India. The lawyer in Nehru brought him into conflict with the police officials, who arrested him without any warrants. Nehru was amused during his encounter with a semi-literate judicial officer who was trying him on different charges with no knowledge of the legal procedures and least bothered about the legal niceties. In spite of his protests, Nehru and his companions were arrested without any warrants being served on them and lodged in a small cell.

A Sikh gentleman named Darbara Singh Malhan, was also involved by the police because on his arrival at Jaito, Nehru enquired from him the way to the Gurudwara and he committed the 'offence' of pointing out the direction. During Nehru's stay in Nabha Jail and his subsequent trials he not only gained first-hand knowledge about the Sikh cause and their sufferings but also discovered the highhandedness of the bureaucracy and the arbitrary nature of justice in the Sikh state of Nabha then put under the control of a British Administrator, named Wilson Johnston. In a long hand-written statement, surcharged with emotions and highly appreciative of the Akalis, Nehru attacked the British Administrator of Nabha and the judicial machinery in the State for their 'unscrupulous and crooked ways'.²⁵ Having gained first-hand impression about the Akalis and their movement, Nehru became their great admirer and wished to prove 'worthy of their high tradition and fine courage'. The last paragraph of his original statement drafted in Nabha Jail on 23 November 1923, reads as follows:

I was in jail when the Guru-ka-Bagh struggle was gallantly fought and won by the Sikhs. I marveled at the courage and sacrifice of the Akalis and wished that I could be given an opportunity of showing my deep admiration of them by some form of service. That opportunity has now been given to me and I earnestly hope that I shall prove worthy of their high tradition and fine courage. *Sat Sri Akal*²⁶

Jawaharlal's visit and subsequent arrest and trial at Nabha made him popular with the Sikh leadership and Sikh masses. At the same time bonds of friendship between Baba Kharak Singh and other nationalist leaders continued to grow. It is interesting to note that while after the passing of the Sikh Gurudwaras and Shrines Bill in July 1925, most of the Akali leaders arrested in connection with the Akali Movement were released, Baba Kharak Singh and other extremists still remained behind the bars. Malcolm Hailey, who succeeded Edward Maclagan as the Governor of Panjab, thought of creating divisions in the Sikh leadership by imposing a condition on their release. Baba Kharak Singh, who had by now, become well-known for his uncompromising nature, refused to accept the conditional release while moderate Sikhs led by Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh accepted the conditions and came out of jails to capture the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee. Interestingly enough, when the general body meeting of the S.G.P.C. met in October 1926, Baba Kharak Singh, who was still in prison, was elected as the President of the S.G.P.C. with Master Tara Singh (also in prison) as the Vice-President. This shows the popularity that Kharak Singh had gained among the Sikh masses through his selfless sacrifice. While Master Tara Singh and other extremist leaders were unconditionally released in 1926, Baba Kharak Singh continued to languish in the Dera Ghazi Khan jail even after the passing of the Bill. As a

result of the mounting pressure on the bureaucracy, the Government of Panjab was forced to unconditionally release Baba Kharak Singh in June 1927, after five-and-a half years' stay in jail. Since the ban on the wearing of the Gandhi cap was not removed by the Government, Kharak Singh came out of the Jail but still not wearing his turban and clothes. He was taken in a huge procession in the streets of Amritsar. In Lahore, thousands of people thronged the streets to have his *darshan*. When the Baba visited the Akal Takhat, he was presented with a *Saropa*. Later he visited the historic Jallianwalla Bagh where he was accorded a warm welcome by the leading citizens of Amritsar.

During the early phase of the Akali struggle for Gurudwara reform, Baba Kharak Singh, through his prudence was able to involve the Sikh masses in the country's struggle for freedom. At the same time through his association with the Indian National Congress, the Baba and his lieutenants acted as couriers in taking the Congress's message to the people of Panjab. It was not surprising to find that when Mahatma Gandhi gave a call for Civil Disobedience Movement, the Panjabis in general and the Sikhs in particular favourably responded to his call.

Notes and References

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- 2 A. Quoted in M.L. Ahluwalia, *Gurudwara Reform Movement – Select Documents*.
- B. Hira Singh Dard, *Merian Kuch Itihasik Yadan* (Punjabi). p. 153.
3. For a detailed account see Mohinder Singh, *op. cit*, pp. 20-23.
4. For a detailed account of Nankana tragedy see Gurbakhsh Singh Jhabalia, *Shahidi Jiwan* (Punjabi); Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, pp. 27-41.
5. *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XXII, p. 170.
6. Komma, "The Sikh Situation in Panjab", *Fortnightly Review*, September, 1923.
7. Ganda Singh (Ed.) *Some Confidential Papers of the Akali Movement*, p. 11.
8. Panjab Government Communique dated 12th January, 1922 quoted in File No. 459/II/1922. Home-Political, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
9. Partap Singh, *Gurudwara Sudhar : Arthat Akali Lehar* (Punjabi), p. 142.
10. *Ibid: The Civil and Military Gazette* of December 4, 1921, gives the following account:
Sardar Kharak Singh asked whether the case against him was by the Government, and being told that it was he said that as the Government was the prosecutor and the court its servant, he did not want to make any statement to the court, because a party could not arrogate to itself the functions of a judge. The accused's position as President of the *Panth* (the Sikh Nation) was similar to that of the United States of America, France and Germany.
11. Partap Singh, *Gurudwara Sudhar Arthat Akali Lehar* p. 143.
12. *Ibid*.
13. *The Civil and Military Gazette*, 15 February, 1922.

14. For a detailed account of the Sikh Struggle at Guru-ka-Bagh see pp. 49-61 of the *The Akali Movement* quoted before.
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24. See for details pp. 109-16 of *The Autobiography* by Jawaharlal Nehru.
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4

CRUSADE AGAINST COMMUNAL REPRESENTATION

With the passing of the Sikh Gurudwaras and Shrines Bill in the Panjab Legislative Council, the Akali struggle was now almost over. While leaders like Master Tara Singh took control of the S.G.P.C formed to manage the historic Sikh shrines, Baba Kharak Singh found the Gurudwara politics too narrow an arena for his larger national interest. During his early association with Indian National Congress and prominent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, he found that the Sikh community had a major role to play in the task of nation building. Instead of contesting for some office in the state assembly as a result of the introduction of provincial autonomy, he decided to dedicate the rest of his life to liberating his motherland from foreign yoke. Through his lieutenants

in the Akali Dal and the Central Sikh League, he strengthened the Congress movement in Panjab by involving the Sikh community in the national cause. The years following the successful culmination of the movement for Gurudwara reform witnessed communal tension in Panjab and other parts of the country. Interestingly, the Sikh leadership, instead of being trapped in the British game, helped in bringing about communal harmony and peace in Amritsar and other affected towns in Panjab.

The cooperation and understanding between Baba Kharak Singh and the Congress leaders was greatly responsible for Mangal Singh and other Sikh leaders firmly standing behind the Congress in the various parleys for the transfer of power. Kharak Singh and his lieutenants, Sardul Singh Caveeshar and Mangal Singh opposed separate electorates and emphasized that they were quite willing to forego the principle of weightage, provided this system was abolished in the case of other minorities too. The proposal from the Sikh leaders was considered by the Working Committee of the Indian National Congress, which met in Bombay on 15-16 May 1927. A formula was evolved which provided for joint electorate with reservation of seats on the basis of population in the province and reciprocal concessions to minorities, including the Sikhs in Panjab, by mutual agreement for giving them weighted representation and for maintaining the same proportion in the central

electorate as well.¹ Though the Congress tried to win over the confidence of the Sikhs, the formula failed to satisfy their aspirations. Being a microscopic minority in the all-India population, they could not provide reciprocal leverage to another community. This matter again came up for discussion at the forty-second session of the Indian National Congress held in Madras from 26-28 December 1927. Master Tara Singh, who attended the Session as A.I.C.C. member, succeeded in persuading the Working Committee to amend the formula to meet the Sikh aspirations. The working Committee also appointed a sub-committee to promote communal harmony. Baba Kharak Singh and Sardar Sardul Singh Caveesher were taken as the representatives of the Sikh community on this Committee.²

While the Indian National Congress was still busy working out some sort of arrangement to evolve a consensus to accommodate claims of the minorities, without compromising with the basic principles of the party, the Viceroy of India announced the arrival of the Simon Commission in India on 8 November 1927. The Commission, which consisted of seven members from three political parties in the British Parliament with Sir John Simon as its Chairman,³ was to review the working of the Act of 1919 and to recommend if India was ready for further constitutional concessions.

Sending the Commission two years ahead of its schedule and failure to include any Indian as its

member, caused great resentment amongst nationalist circles in India. The Indian National Congress passed a Resolution in December 1927, advocating boycott of the Commission at every stage.⁴

Stand on Simon Commission

Whether or not to go with the Congress on the issue of the boycott of the Simon Commission was a crucial test for the Sikh leadership. A section of the moderate Sikhs led by Sardar Jogindra Singh advocated cooperation with the Simon Commission. On noticing that the majority of the Sikh masses did not support their line of action, they tried to hoodwink the members of their community by emphasizing that special concessions for the Sikhs were not possible without cooperating with the British. But leaders like Baba Kharak Singh and other nationalist Sikhs did not allow their strategy to succeed. They convened an All-Parties' Sikh Conference at Amritsar on 30 January 1928, to consider the attitude of the Sikh community towards the Commission. Baba Kharak Singh, who dominated the Conference prevailed upon the Sikh masses to cooperate with the Congress and to boycott the Simon Commission by observing complete *hartal* on 3 February 1928, when the Commission was to land in Bombay.⁶ His speech greatly influenced the Sikh masses and they decided to support the Congress call to boycott the Commission and participate in the *hartal* on 3 February. The Central Sikh League, which had

by now established its credentials as a non-communal nationalist organization, passed a formal resolution supporting the Congress call for boycotting the Simon Commission.⁷ However, before the Simon Commission could reach India, Lord Birkenhead, the Secretary of State for India, challenged the Indian leaders to produce an agreed solution to the communal problem.

The Indian National Congress accepted the challenge and decided to call an All-Parties Conference in New Delhi to discuss the vexed question of communal representation. The Central Sikh League was the only Sikh organization which was invited to attend the Conference. The representatives of the Sikh League prevailed upon Pandit Motilal Nehru and the other Congress leaders not to accept the Muslim proposals for reservation of seats in the two Muslim majority provinces of Panjab and Bengal.⁸ Subsequently, when a Committee under Motilal Nehru was formed by the All-Parties Conference to frame the Swaraj Constitution, Mangal Singh, a representative of the Central Sikh League, was also included in it. The Committee published its recommendations in the form of a report popularly known as the Nehru Report.

The Report which was published on 10 August 1928, and ratified by the All-Parties Conference held at Lucknow on 28-30 August 1928, recommended the abolition of seats for the Muslims in the provinces in which they were in minority and at the Centre.⁹ Mangal

Singh's point that there should be no reservation of seats in Bengal and Panjab, where the Muslims were in majority, was conceded. While the Nehru Committee Report conceded reservation of seats to the Muslims in provinces where they were in minority, it did not recommend any reservation of seats for the Hindus and the Sikhs in Panjab, where both of them were in minority.¹⁰ The committee argued that the reservation could not be granted to the Hindus in Panjab because they constituted 35% of the population and, could not, therefore, be regarded as a 'minority'. The Sikhs, who constituted a small minority in the Province, were denied this concession on the plea that they had 'never asked for reservation'.¹¹

Baba Kharak Singh and the other Sikh leaders towing his line of action, reiterated that communal electorate and representation were harmful to the country. But since the Congress had accepted the Muslim demand for joint electorate with reservation of seats on communal lines, the leadership of the Central Sikh League was compelled to demand similar concessions in the case of the Sikhs too. As mentioned earlier, this has been described by some scholars as 'apologetic communalism' amongst the nationalist Sikh leadership. Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants faced a dilemma. In case they did not insist on weightage for the Sikhs and reservations on communal lines due to their over-enthusiastic nationalism, they

were likely to lose the sympathy of the Sikh masses and run the risk of being marginalised. Consequently, one finds obvious contradictions and dichotomies in the utterances and actions of even staunch nationalists like Baba Kharak Singh. This is obvious from the resolution on 'Sikh rights' passed by the All-Parties Sikh conference in 1928, wherein they blew hot and cold in the same breath. By saying that the Sikhs do not want reservation of seats on communal lines, but at the same time resolving that the rights of the Sikhs in Panjab could be protected only if they were given one-third share in the administration sounds contradictory.¹² The resolution also declared that the Sikhs would not tolerate the domination by majority community and demanded that the principle adopted at the Madras session of the Congress regarding Hindu-Muslim settlement be applied to the Sikhs as well. They also demanded adequate safeguards be provided to them in Sind and North-West Frontier Province.

Actually speaking, the fear in the Sikh minds was that once the popular ministries were formed on the basis of majority, the Muslims, who constituted majority in Panjab, were bound to dominate the provincial scene and thereby deprive the Sikhs of the special concessions. It was this lurking fear in the minds of the Sikh leadership including the nationalist Sikhs like Kharak Singh and Mangal Singh, that compelled them to seek support of the Indian National Congress in safeguarding the 'Sikh

interests' in Panjab. At the same time Mehtab Singh and Giani Sher Singh, two important leaders of the moderate group who had been ousted from Akali politics, joined the fray by writing to Dr. M. A. Ansari, the Congress President, expressing their disappointment over the recommendations of the Nehru Committee and asserting that "the Sikhs shall not accept representation in Central and Provincial Legislature on population basis so far as Panjab was concerned".¹³

It seems that these leaders were making virtue of necessity. They realized that because of their small numbers, the Sikhs were not in a position to form ministry in Panjab on the basis of popular elections. The stand taken by Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh and other moderate leaders put the nationalist Sikhs on the defensive. Mangal Singh was the only person left in the League who maintained his previous stand and in the process lost his position in the Central Sikh League and the S.G.P.C.¹⁴ In the growing tide of Muslim communalism, Sikh nationalists, who had all along been opposing communal representation, were also swayed by communal considerations. Instead of opposing the communal electorate, they started putting forward counter claims. The Central Sikh League even went to the extent of revising its earlier resolution on the subject. In a meeting held in Lahore on 27 August 1928, a resolution was passed "expressing regret over the fact that the Sikhs had not been given due rights

in the Constitution of India as drafted by the Nehru Committee."¹⁵ This *volte face* in the stand taken by the Central Sikh League greatly upset Mangal Singh and his supporters, who attacked Master Tara Singh and others for having gone back from their previous commitment of opposing communal electorate in any form. The bitter controversy between Master Tara Singh and Mangal Singh put Baba Kharak Singh in an awkward position. He was then president of both the Central Sikh League and the S.G.P.C. To avoid being accused of supporting communal line by voicing his protest over Nehru Committee Report ignoring the Sikh interest, he thought of attacking the Nehru Report on a different and much stronger footing.

Rather than accusing the Nehru Committee of ignoring the Sikh interests as other Sikh leaders were doing, Baba Kharak Singh attacked the Nehru Report for its acceptance of Dominion Status instead of *Purna Swaraj* (Complete Independence). Further, the Baba was unhappy that the Nehru Report had been published at the time of announcement of the Simon Commission's visit to India. In his opinion, differences resulting from publication of the Nehru Report were likely to weaken the Congress programme to boycott the Simon Commission. Therefore, he wanted the Nehru Report to be shelved and complete independence to be declared as the goal of India's struggle for liberation. He declared:

I am on principle against Imperialism and do not want to see a single empire on the face of the earth, not to speak of suffering my dear country to be part of an Empire of any foreign people. I want to see established in India a purely Indian and a completely independent government without the least interference from any foreign nation. I want to see republics all over the world.¹⁶

When Mangal Singh realized that in the teeth of opposition from almost all important leaders, it was difficult for him to continue to support the Nehru Report, he requested Motilal to launch propaganda for popularizing the scheme drafted by his committee. The controversy over the Nehru Report greatly embarrassed intellectuals among the Sikh community because they felt that the Sikhs were first from among the minorities to condemn the system of communal representation and yet an influential group amongst their leadership had started opposing the recommendations of the Nehru committee to abolish the system of communal representation from Panjab. Gurmukh Nihal Singh, a leading Sikh intellectual, tried to bring about a rapprochement between the two sides and to explain the complexities of the situation. He exhorted the Sikh leaders that they should rejoice over the fact that the Panjab was going to be the first Province in India from where the evil of communal representation was

being thrown out by abolishing separate electorates on communal lines.¹⁷ But rigidity in the two camps of the Central Sikh League did not allow efforts at rapprochement to succeed. When the next session of the Central Sikh League was announced, both camps started mustering support for their respective stands on the subject.

At the 28th session of the League held on 22 October 1928 in Lyallpur, controversy over the Nehru Report dominated proceedings of the Central Sikh League. When a message from Baba Gurdit Singh, a former President of the League, was read advising the members of the League not to indulge in criticism of the Nehru Report, Baba Kharak Singh, who was then presiding over the League session, threatened that he would leave the League if the Nehru Report was not rejected.¹⁸ The outcome of the highly controversial session further disappointed Mangal Singh and his supporters because the resolution passed by the League decided that in Panjab, the Sikhs were under no circumstances, going to accept domination of any community on the basis of reservation of seats. It seems that the growing fear of Muslims occupying important positions in the administration in Panjab as a result of the formation of popular ministries made the Sikh leaders believe that they were going to lose their privileged position in the event of Muslim League forming the Government in the state.

When the Nehru Committee Report came up for discussion at the All Parties Convention at Calcutta in 1928, Sikhs' opposition to it became clear. The Sikh leaders conveyed their feelings to Mahatma Gandhi, who realized that justice had not been done to them, but expressed his helplessness in getting the Report modified at the Calcutta Convention. A large number of Sikh delegates led by Master Tara Singh and his supporters also met other important Congress leaders and forcefully presented before them the Sikh case. Pandit Motilal Nehru agreed that if the Sikh leaders were able to get an amendment passed at the convention, he would not oppose it.¹⁹ But, in the meantime, return of M.A. Jinnah from London and his participation at the convention with emphasis on 50% representation for the Muslims in Panjab on the basis of their population and at the same time demanding 33% share in the centre further complicated matters. The Muslim and Sikh leaders staking their claims for weightage created a new impasse.

The Convention leaders decided to form a Sub-Committee to consider the points raised by the Muslims and the Sikhs. Prominent leaders of the Congress like Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Motilal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and others, along with some prominent Sikh and Muslim leaders, were taken in the Sub-Committee formed to consider the Sikh demand for weightage but without much success. Thus, the Sikh leaders returned

from Calcutta disappointed and arranged an annual session of the Central Sikh League in October 1928 at Lyallpur. The talk of boycott of the Congress by the Sikhs was in the air. Mahatma Gandhi continued his efforts to win back the Sikh leaders who were disappointed with the recommendations of the Nehru Committee. He sent his good wishes for the success of the Central Sikh League session and hoped that the League would have the wisdom not to boycott the Congress as the question about the adjustment of Sikh claims was still open to discussion.²⁰

At this time, three factions emerged in the Central Sikh League. Paradoxical as it may sound, the first group which stood for total non-cooperation with the Congress on the issue of the Nehru Report was led by Baba Kharak Singh himself. Perhaps it was the consistent pressure from Baba Kharak Singh that compelled the Congress leadership to shelve the Nehru Report and declare *Purna Swaraj* as its goal at the historic session of the Congress held at Lahore in December, 1929. The moderate group led by Giani Sher Singh tried to exploit the situation by promising support to the Nehru Report, if it agreed to provide 30% representation to the Sikhs in the state Legislative Council. Mangal Singh was still advocating cooperation with the Congress. The significant feature of the whole situation was that Master Tara Singh, who by now had come to dominate the Sikh political scene, was not in favour of boycotting the Congress. "We

cannot boycott the Congress permanently", said Master Tara Singh in his Presidential Address at the Lyallpur session.

I would not mind if you, instead of standing with the Congress, boycott it and stand in front of it in the fight for freedom. But if you boycott the Congress and stand in the back lines, it will be a matter of shame for our community. Those who are for boycotting the Congress must devise some positive fighting programme, and I am sure all the people here will be with them. But if you simply pass a resolution to boycott the Congress and oppose whatever the Congress does, you will be caught in the trap of bureaucracy. Some, tired of our inactivity, may rejoin the Congress: the rest may die their natural death. I beseech you to be very cautious when considering this question. On the other hand, if we go on working with the Congress as before, our attitude may be misunderstood and we may not be considered earnest in our demands. This is also dangerous, and we have to chalk out a *via media*. It is not difficult to chart a safe course if you gentlemen consider unity to be the chief need of the time.²¹

The stand taken by Master Tara Singh greatly embarrassed Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants. In the Lyallpur session, Master Tara Singh's group carried the day by getting a resolution passed for cooperation with the Congress while a counter-resolution for non-cooperation with the Congress moved by Amar Singh

of *Sher-e-Punjab* was rejected. In the meantime, Baba Kharak Singh developed another misunderstanding with the Congress on the issue of the colours in the Congress flag. He felt that while the Hindu and Muslim communities had been represented while deciding the colours of the flag, the Sikhs had been ignored. Since the Congress could ill afford to alienate a leader of Baba Kharak Singh's stature it decided to request Jawaharlal Nehru to call upon Babaji personally and try to remove his misgivings. Jawaharlal called on Baba Kharak Singh at his residence in Lahore and explained to him that while deciding the colours of the National Flag communal representation was not in their mind. In the meantime, the Congress announced its annual session to be held in Lahore in December, 1929. For the success of the session, the Congress leaders wanted complete support from Baba Kharak Singh, who, inspite of his occasional differences with the Congress, was considered to be the tallest among the Sikh nationalist leaders.

Since Congress had itself decided to bury the Nehru Report and to pass a resolution for *Purna Swaraj*, the major grouse of Baba Kharak Singh got removed. The historic Congress Session held at Lahore in December, 1929 was presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru and it passed the famous resolution demanding *Purna Swaraj* (Complete Independence). It further declared that the word 'Swaraj' in Article 1 of the Congress

Constitution meant "Complete Independence".²² By another resolution, the Congress decided to reassure the Sikhs and other minorities that in the future scheme of constitution for free India, their interests would not be ignored. On the question of minorities, the resolution declared as under:

But as the Sikhs in particular, and the Muslims and other minorities in general, had expressed dissatisfaction at the solution of the communal question proposed in the Nehru Report, the Congress assures the Sikhs, the Muslims and other minorities that no solution thereof in any future constitution will be acceptable to the Congress that does not give full satisfaction to the parties concerned.²³

During the Congress session, Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Dr. Ansari and other members of the Congress Working Committee called on Baba Kharak Singh to know his mind. The Baba told them that he wanted the Congress to declare in unequivocal terms its goal for complete independence. As Congress had already passed a formal resolution in favour of complete independence and Baba Kharak Singh's doubts about Sikh representation on the Congress flag had already been removed, he felt happy and came out in open support of the Congress programme. In the presence of Baba Kharak Singh, Congress leaders also drafted a resolution which said that they would not accept any

constitution which did not give equal and fair treatment to all minorities, particularly, the Sikhs.²⁴

Friendly relations between Baba Kharak Singh and the Indian National Congress having been restored, an Akali Conference was organized at Lahore in which a resolution was passed authorizing Baba Kharak Singh to form a Committee to carry on negotiations with the Congress on the issue of Sikh representation. Another healthy development at this time was that Master Tara Singh, who had earlier developed some differences with Baba Kharak Singh, also came round and supported this move. He expressed his happiness with the Congress initiative alienating the Sikh fear in the following words:

There were people who were trying to lead the Sikhs into the bureaucratic snare. Congress leaders have risen to the occasion and acted like statesmen. Mahatma Gandhi is to be congratulated, for it is he who is mainly responsible for this resolution. I am sure that the Congress will gather great strength and wave of enthusiasm will sweep the Sikhs.²⁵

When the Congress launched the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, Baba Kharak Singh and other important Sikh leaders came out in support of the Congress programme. On 14 April 1930, when a meeting of various political parties was held at Lahore to chalk out strategy for Panjab's participation in the

Civil Disobedience Movement, the Sikh leaders actively participated in this meeting. It was decided to form a 'War Council' for actively carrying out the efforts in strengthening the Civil Disobedience Movement in Panjab. Baba Kharak Singh was taken as a member on this Council along with other Congress and Muslim leaders.

When, during the Civil Disobedience Movement, the British authorities committed excesses on the Pathans in Peshawar for their active participation in the movement, Master Tara Singh led a *Jatha* of 100 Sikhs from Amritsar to give moral support to his Congress friends in Peshawar. However, he was arrested on the way at Lahore along with other members of the *Jatha*. In the meantime, Mahatma Gandhi and other important leaders of the Indian National Congress were also arrested. The Government now tried to suppress the movement with force but on realizing that it was not possible to do so, it thought of finding a negotiated settlement. Consequently, the Secretary of State for India announced a Round Table Conference in London with a view to suggesting constitutional reforms for India. The first Round Table Conference, which was held in London from 12 November 1930 to 19 January 1931, was boycotted by the Congress. Baba Kharak Singh and other Sikh leaders, who were cooperating with the Congress over the issue of Civil Disobedience also boycotted the first Round Table Conference. The British

government used a device—sending a namesake of Master Tara Singh, who was a judge of the Patiala High Court to participate in the Round Table Conference. But this move of the government did not get any support from the Sikh masses.

As a result of Gandhi-Irwin Pact signed on 5 March 1931, the Congress decided to join the Second Round Table Conference in London and sent Mahatma Gandhi as its sole representative. The failure of the Second Round Table Conference and inability of the leaders of various political parties and communal groups to evolve a commonly agreed formula on the vexed question of communal representation provided the British authorities with the much needed argument to impose their own solution. As a result, the British Prime Minister, Sir Ramsay MacDonald, gave his Award on 17 August 1932, which came to be known as the 'Communal Award'. The Award not only legitimized the existing communal groups but attempted to weaken further the nationalist elements by creating new categories of electoral entities.

In such an arrangement, Muslims were bound to get a clear majority with even Hindus and the Sikhs together being unable to bargain for any concessions in Panjab. As such both the Hindu and Sikh leaders in Panjab strongly opposed the Communal Award. Baba Kharak Singh, who was well-known for his opposition to communal representation, came out with a scathing

attack on the British policy of dividing people in India on communal lines. He toured all over the province and made fiery speeches against the Award, as a result of which he was quickly arrested and sent behind the bars. Baba was released only after the elections had taken place in Panjab on the passing of the Act of 1935 and introduction of Provincial Autonomy. However, arrest and incarceration failed to check Baba Kharak Singh from criticizing the British policy of dividing the people and thereby weakening forces of nationalism in India. Following lines from an English poet befittingly describe Baba's zest for the freedom:

Stone walls do not a prison make

Nor iron bars a cage!

Mind innocent and quiet

Take that for a hermitage!

If I have freedom in my love,

And in my soul am free,

Angels alone, that soar above,

Enjoy such liberty.

Notes and References

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3. For further details see *Indian Statutory Commission Report* in three volumes, Calcutta, 1930.
4. Zaidi, *op. cit*, p. 497.
5. *The Tribune*, 31 January 1928.

6. *Ibid*
7. Sukhmani Bal, *Politics of the Central Sikh League*, New Delhi, 1990.
8. Jaswant Singh (Ed), *Master Tara Singh: Jiwan, Sangrash te Udes*, p. 106.
9. For further details see *Nehru Committee Report*, pp. 39-40.
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14. *Ibid*.
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17. For details see his article. "The Sikhs and the Nehru Report". *The Tribune*, 6 October 1928.
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20. Quoted in Kailash Gulati, *Akalis: Past and Present*. In the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XXXVIII, p. 315, there it mentions about the assurance to the Sikhs without any reference to the League session.
21. *The Tribune*, 16 October 1929.
22. Zaidi, op. cit. vol IX, p. 671.
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5

ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION TO NATIONALIST POLITICS

Baba Kharak Singh, who entered the arena of the country's struggle for freedom through the Central Sikh League and the Akali Movement for Gurudwara reform was the only Sikh leader of stature, who remained steadfast in his nationalist outlook till the end. Attempts by British officials to alienate him from the mainstream of the national movement failed as well as the effort of the Muslim League to allure him to its side. A man of iron will and strong determination, Baba had the reputation for remaining steadfast, once he had taken a stand on a particular issue. As mentioned earlier, Baba spent over five years in the cold climate of Dera Ghazi Khan jail in the North West Frontier, without any clothes except his *kachha* (short breeches) because the jail authorities had imposed a ban on the wearing of black turban and

Gandhi cap. Baba refused to accept any concession on turban till ban on Gandhi cap was also withdrawn. To some of his friends, this appeared to be a trivial matter. They advised him to start wearing his clothes since the jail authorities had yielded to his demand for wearing the black turban. But to Baba Kharak Singh this appeared to be a clever bureaucratic snare to divide the Sikh and Hindu prisoners. Therefore, he continued to suffer in the cold climate of Dera Ghazi Khan jail for over five years till his unconditional release in 1927. This consistent stand of Babaji greatly endeared him to the nationalist forces in the country and also members of other communities.

It was the prudence of Baba Kharak Singh which was greatly responsible for widening the scope of the initial Akali struggle for Gurudwara reform and in involving the Sikh masses in the larger struggle for India's independence. And again it was Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants in the Central Sikh League and the Akali Dal, who were responsible for bringing about a close cooperation between the Sikh masses and the Congress leadership in Panjab. It was mainly due to the leadership provided by Baba Kharak Singh that the Sikhs in Panjab could secure active sympathy and support of the Indian National Congress during their two-fold struggle directed against the corrupt custodians of the Sikh shrines on the one hand and the British administration in the province, on the

other. The Congress-Sikh cooperation during the early decades of the twentieth century resulted in the two leaderships coming closer to each other and the Sikhs being involved in the Congress programme. In fact the two groups among the Sikhs—(i) Akali advocates of purely religious reform and (ii) nationalist Sikhs, who looked upon the Gurudwara reform as the regional manifestation of the larger Congress movement of non-violent, non-cooperation remained united as long as Baba Kharak Singh was at the helm of affairs.

The Gurudwara reform movement being over, most of the important leaders were busy in controlling the Gurudwaras and their funds. Baba Kharak Singh found regional politics to be too narrow a field to satisfy his nationalist aspiration. Having been greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, Baba Kharak Singh volunteered his heart and soul into the struggle for liberation of his motherland. Nothing would give Baba Kharak Singh greater pleasure than to see his country freed from the foreign yoke. After the announcement of the Communal Award and with the growing communal feelings created by the British policy of communal representation, Baba Kharak Singh was the only leader amongst the Sikhs who continued his battle against the Muslim League demand for Pakistan. After the introduction of provincial autonomy as a result of the implementation of the 1935 Act, the other Sikh leaders gained political power at the provincial level within the framework of

British empire. Baba Kharak Singh refused to accept any such arrangement which did not satisfy the real aspirations of the people. When Raja Narendra Nath, a member of the Panjab Legislative Council, approached him to sign a memorandum to be submitted to the Panjab Government, he refused to do so saying that he was prepared to lead a *morcha* but did not accept the legality of a provincial government which was not truly representative of the people. He opined:

Who does not know that the so-called provincial autonomy is nothing but a shame, a mockery and a puppet-play and that the wire pullers behind the scenes are still the British representatives of the foreign ruling force.

When the Second World War broke out, there were differences of opinion among the Sikh leadership about their support to the British war efforts. Keeping in line with his anti-imperialist stance, Kharak Singh openly announced his opposition to India's participation in the war efforts of the allies. And this was the stand which Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders also took in the beginning of the war. The Maharaja of Patiala and other moderate and pro-British leaders in Panjab joined the British war efforts and later even Master Tara Singh parted company with the Indian National Congress by resigning from the Congress Working Committee to help Sikhs' recruitment into the army. However, Baba

Kharak Singh stuck to his original stand of opposition to the war efforts of Britain and the allies. Addressing a huge gathering of the Sikhs he said:

His Majesty the King Emperor had appealed to his subjects to lend their whole-hearted support to the British Government and its allies in the war against Hitler. While I do not want Hitler or any other foreigner to conquer India yet I do not want to help the British who have so callously trampled our people under their iron heels. Why should we help the British who killed hundreds of our innocent people in the Jallianwala Bagh? Why should we help those who put hundreds of thousands of our compatriots in prison? Let them fight their own battle and let not the Indian soldiers spill their blood for those who have so ungratefully ignored our services in the previous war. This will teach a lesson to the arrogant British who do not care for the suffering of millions of Indians who are starving. I have no sympathy with the British for they never had any for us. So, why should we bother about their lot? We have our own problems to solve and instead of draining our resources for the victory of the British and their allies, let us converge our efforts for bettering the lot of our own people. Now is the right time to strike.²

At a time when the British authorities in India were busy mobilizing resources to help Britain and its allies in the war effort and most of the Sikh leaders agreed to help in Sikh recruitment, Baba Kharak Singh's open

revolt greatly disturbed the government. Knowing fully well on the basis of the past experience that Baba Kharak Singh would not budge an inch from the stand he had once taken, the government thought the only way to check his opposition was to throw him behind the bars. Accordingly, in August 1940, he was arrested and imprisoned. It was during his internment that he developed a cataract and was released in 1942 to undergo an eye operation. In August 1942, his wife, Hira Devi, also passed away. Five years later, he also lost his only son, Pritipal Singh, in a road accident near Kulu. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and other prominent nationalist leaders joined him in his bereavement.

When the Second World War was on, the British tried to enlist support of the Congress and the Akali leadership by promising various concessions to the Indians in case the British won the war. It was with this aim in view that Cripps Mission visited India in March 1942. While the Muslim League declared its open support to the British war efforts, the Congress gave a call for boycott. The Congress ministries in various provinces resigned in protest against the Viceroy declaring India a belligerent country without consulting any of the Indian leaders. The Cripps Mission tried to placate the Muslim League. According to the proposals put forward by the Mission, provinces were given the right to get out of the Indian Union and non-acceding provinces could even draft a

separate constitution of their own with a status equal to that of the Indian Union.³ This was a clear indication towards the creation of Pakistan. Such an arrangement was not acceptable to the Indian National Congress, which stood for a united India. Baba Kharak Singh, who was strongly opposed to the idea of Pakistan and even the vague offers of a Sikh state to hoodwink the Sikh leadership, strongly criticized the Cripps proposals which encouraged vivisection of India. Other prominent Sikh leaders like Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and Giani Sher Singh also supported Baba Kharak Singh's stand.

When the Muslim League passed a formal resolution in favour of Pakistan in its annual session held at Lahore in 1940, Baba Kharak Singh strongly opposed the same. To quote Babaji in his own words:

I am shocked to know that Mr. Jinnah and Muslim League have put forth a plan under which Pakistan is to be established by dividing India. I am afraid my Muslim friends have fallen into a dangerous trap which had been laid by British statesmen. The British do not want to leave India, and to perpetuate their domination, they want to create perpetual disunity amongst the Indian communities. The whole scheme smacks of mischief and British statesmen have found in Mr. Jinnah a scapegoat to give effect to their sinister machinations of 'Divide and Rule'. I would strongly appeal to my countrymen to oppose this evil scheme tooth and nail.⁴

Baba Kharak Singh organized a strong agitation to oppose the partition of India and meetings and conferences were held throughout Panjab for this purpose. Towards the end of 1944, a huge conference was proposed to be held at Gujranwala over which Baba Kharak Singh was to preside. The authorities banned the Conference. Babaji defied the law and went to the venue of the conference and was consequently arrested. After a few weeks he was released, as the government feared a great agitation in Panjab over his arrest.

During the Second World War, when Subash Chandra Bose organized the Indian National Army, Baba Kharak Singh issued a statement expressing his solidarity with the I.N.A. heroes. Later, when the I.N.A. was declared unlawful organization, the Congress leaders came out in support of the I.N.A. cause. Baba Kharak Singh issued the following statement in support of the I.N.A. soldiers:

I have all my sympathy for the I.N.A. which was organized by Shriyut Subash Chandra Bose. It is full and pure patriotism and to call such heroes traitors is to insult humanity. We have every right to revolt against a Government which is not our own and which is exploiting India so badly. I wish it to be clearly understood by the British imperialists that they dare not take any strong action against the I.N.A. officers and soldiers. God forbid if the British imperialists do not pay any heed to the sentiments and feelings of millions of Indians and inflict some deterrent punishment on our

heroes, it will create a storm of resentment throughout the Indian continent. In that case I shall be the first man to launch a *morcha* against the British Government in India and if they resort to violence and firing, I shall face the bullet in my chest. For such a heroic and noble cause I am prepared to stake my all.⁵

After the failure of the Shimla Conference in 1945 when Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India, suddenly announced general elections in India to elicit people's verdict about the future of India, Baba Kharak Singh played a significant role by lending his support to the Indian National Congress and by appealing the Sikhs to vote for their national and secular political organization. Baba visited various villages and towns in Panjab and the N.W.F.P and exhorted his compatriots to strengthen Congress to save India from balkanisation. As a result of Baba Kharak Singh and his lieutenants' efforts, Congress got splendid victory in Panjab with many of the Sikh candidates having been elected on the Congress tickets.

Notes and References

1. *Abhinandan Granth*, *op. cit.*; p. 206.
2. *Ibid.* p. 210.
3. For details see Maurice Gwyer and A. Appadorai (Ed.) *Speeches and Documents on the Indian Constitution*, London, 1957, vol. II.
4. *Abhinandan Granth*, p. 211.
5. *Ibid.* p. 214.

6

THE LAST PHASE

During the last phase of the country's struggle for independence while most of the leaders started reconciling themselves to the inevitability of the creation of Pakistan, Baba Kharak Singh was like Gandhi opposed to any division of his motherland on communal lines. When Lord Attlee, the British Prime Minister, announced the division of India on 20 February 1947, on communal lines, Baba Kharak Singh was greatly upset. After the partition of India in August 1947, Baba Kharak Singh had to undergo the trials and tribulations of leaving his hearth and home like many other Hindu and Sikh compatriots of West Panjab, which was made part of Pakistan. While Baba Kharak Singh did not take any active part in the Indian politics or contest for any office or position in the government in independent

India, he was happy that his biggest dream of seeing his motherland free had been fulfilled in his own lifetime. Unlike other political leaders, he did not shift his loyalties or try to cash on his contribution towards freedom struggle. And that is what endeared him the most to those who occupied important positions after the British exit. Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister, had special affection towards old friends and compatriots and expressed special gratitude to him on many occasions. On 14 November 1948, in a huge Sikh gathering arranged to celebrate the birthday of Guru Nanak Dev, Baba Kharak Singh invited Jawaharlal Nehru to attend the function. Nehru happily joined in paying homage to Guru Nanak, and was honoured with a *Saropa* by Baba Kharak Singh. Speaking on the occasion, Nehru described Babaji as "one of those stalwarts who have fought in the frontline of India's struggle for freedom."¹

Though Baba Kharak Singh was greatly marginalized in the provincial politics because of his rigid stand on various issues and his advanced age, he was greatly respected by his national leaders. On the occasion of his 82nd Birthday in June, 1949, the citizens of Delhi arranged a big reception wherein Babaji's services to the nation were fondly recalled. Jawaharlal Nehru presented a silver replica of the National Flag to Babaji in recognition of his services to the nation. Speaking on the occasion Nehru said:

There are few hands which can uphold the honour and preserve the dignity of the National Flag better than those of Babaji. Baba Kharak Singh's record of honesty and integrity cannot be easily equalled. These are the qualities which strengthen a nation. Though people have sometimes differed from him yet they were forced to acknowledge Babaji's greatness. He is one of those stalwarts who have fought in the vanguard of the battle for India's freedom. One outstanding feature of Babaji's life is that he is plain like water and firm like rock. When once he undertakes something, he is there to see that it is duly accomplished. This is the supreme lesson which we, especially our youth, have to learn from the life of this grand man.²

Four years later, a still bigger honour was bestowed on Babaji by bringing out an *Abhinandan Granth* on his 86th birthday. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and other leading citizens of the country joined in felicitating Baba Kharak Singh on this occasion. Nehru continued the friendship and affection for Babaji till the last day by extending greetings on his birthday every year. When death claimed this indomitable freedom fighter of India, on 6 October 1963, the country was shocked beyond words.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Dr. Zakir Hussain, Sardar Hukam Singh, and Mr. Nur-ud-Din Ahmed, the then Mayor of Delhi, were amongst those who visited Babaji's residence to pay their homage

to this great son of India. Leading dailies paid their tribute to Babaji. *The Tribune* paid its respect to Babaji in the following words:

In the death of Baba Kharak Singh, the country has lost one of the old guards who was widely respected for his patriotism and sacrifice for the country's independence.³

While paying homage to the great leader, Master Tara Singh said, "In the death of Baba Kharak Singh, India has lost a great freedom fighter". A public meeting was held in the Town Hall of Delhi on 9 October to mourn his death where leading figures paid their tributes to him. The most befitting tribute to Baba Kharak Singh came from Pandit Nehru who described him as "the bravest among captains of our struggle for freedom".⁴ While no major memorial has been erected in the national capital or in Panjab to perpetuate the memory of this great freedom fighter, there is a road from Gole Dak Khana to Connaught Place called Baba Kharak Singh marg, where most of the state emporia are located. One hopes that an advanced center for the study of Nationalism would be opened in the memory of Baba Kharak Singh so that the values he taught and practiced can be passed over to the younger generation.

Notes and References

1. *Abhinandan Granth*, p. 219-20.
2. *Ibid*, p. 221 & Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. 11, p-410.
3. *The Tribune*, 7 October 1963.
4. *The Statesman*, 10 October 1963.

Appendix-I

A Selection of Speeches by Baba Kharak Singh

The Inauguration of the Indian Republic¹

“On this great day of the inauguration of the Republic of India, I heartily greet the whole nation and pray to the Almighty to confer His blessings on the entire Indian Nation.

Republic is a grand thing and the supreme lesson we all have to learn is that we must inculcate the spirit of tolerance and broad-mindedness. All citizens of India must have equality of opportunity irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Let us bear in mind that the preservation of freedom is more important than

1 Statement issued by Baba Kharak Singh on the inauguration of the Republic of India on 26 January 1950.

its achievement. If we do not wish our motherland to meet the same fate which China has met or if we do not wish chaos and confusion to prevail in our country, we must strive to strengthen our national Government and preserve our internal resources. That alone can save us from the impending disaster which is threatening the present civilization. Let all political parties compose their differences and muster strong under one National Flag of India's Republic and work in unison to show to the world outside that we Indians are capable enough to manage our own affairs.

Speaking as a Sikh I must say that the conception of Republic was first of all conceived in India by the Sikh Gurus and they worked all their lives to make it a real thing. The institution of the Khalsa is a living embodiment of the Republican concept, which the 10th Guru brought into being. I am glad India has realised the lofty ideas of the Great Gurus and I hope and pray that hereafter we shall discard all distinctions whether political, social or racial.

On this glorious day we must pay homage to the memory of all those who have suffered and died in the service of India and by whose untiring efforts we are blessed to witness this great day of our political liberation and national rejoicings."

The Heritage of India¹

“Mr. President, Sisters and Brothers,

I am deeply grateful to you all for the honour you have done me on my 84th birthday. I am very much moved by the honour done, and the sentiments expressed, by my worthy friend and our great Prime Minister, Shriman Pandit Jawaharlal Ji Nehru. I have no desire to say much on this occasion except give expression to a few feelings I have at the moment.

I have always felt that India has a great heritage of the past culture and civilization built by our great men. At this critical moment when chaos and gloom are threatening the world, the Indian people have a great mission to accomplish. Let them show to the world by their high thinking and the simple living that truth alone can make rich and great. Diplomacy and the way of modern politicians are only dragging humanity into ruination. Violence and fraud cannot win. Eventually truth must triumph. I am sure our great Prime Minister will enhance the credit of India in the international sphere. We do not wish to attack any country or pick up any trouble with anyone but if our freedom is endangered by the nefarious activities of those who are out to use us as pawns in their game of political chess, I

1 Speech delivered by Baba Kharak Singh on the occasion of his 84th Birthday, celebrated on 10 June 1951, at the Ramlila Ground, Delhi, where the Prime Minister presented a Shield of Honour to Babaji.

must say that India shall smash all such evil designs. We are all behind our Prime Minister on the stand he has taken with regard to Kashmir and other issues vitally concerning the prestige and honour of India.

Though India has become free from foreign domination yet I feel the nation has not reached the target it set before it. The lot of the common man is far from being happy. Though our Government has been trying to do all it could to improve the situation yet it is an irony of fate that the lot of the Indian people is not what it was expected to be before freedom was achieved. I would therefore, strongly appeal to Pandit Nehru and his government to put into effect some tangible schemes whereby the common man in India may have more food, better clothing and cleaner and stronger shelter. There is plenty of potential wealth in our country. It needs only proper tapping of the natural resources in which our motherland so richly abounds.

Though quite a large number of displaced persons have been rehabilitated, yet a considerable number is still in distress. I would appeal to the Indian people and the National Government to leave no stone unturned in their way of giving proper relief to millions of those unfortunate ones who have suffered by the partition of the country. It is our moral duty to help them.

I am an internationalist. I believe in the Supreme Fatherhood of God and sublime Brotherhood of Man. I wish to see all mankind happy and free.

I have tried to serve my country and my beloved *Panth* by doing whatever humble services the Almighty enabled me to render and I assure my people that until I breathe my last the idea of seeing India at the climax shall be supermost in my mind. That is the only desire left in my heart.

I thank you once again and pray to the Almighty to give more courage and strength to my people so that they may serve mankind with greater zeal, stronger conviction and nobler ideals."

The Problems Before Us¹

"Friends,

I am greatly thankful to you for the honour you have done me and the sentiments you have expressed. Whatever little I have done for my country and my people is all due to the grace and benevolence of the Almighty. I have always depended on Providence and my Great Gurus for guidance and through their grace I have always believed in myself with confidence and cheer. I believe that only men of character can serve their country and mankind. What we need today is the cultivation of high ideas of selfless service and exemplary character.

1 Speech delivered in reply to an Address presented to Baba Kharak Singh by the citizens of Delhi to celebrate his 85th birthday on 20 June, 1952, at the Imperial Hotel, New Delhi, where the President and the Prime Minister of India were also present.

I am very thankful to our Rashtrapati, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, for the kind sentiments he has expressed about me and I am also grateful to my old friend and our worthy Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, for the honour he has been doing me from time to time.

I am really grateful to the Almighty Lord that he has been very kind to me as it was my earnest desire to see my country liberated from foreign domination during my lifetime. Now when the foreigners have gone we have got greater responsibility to discharge. There are many factors which are at work against our country and I wish to warn my countrymen against them. I know that there are many shortcomings in our people but one thing we must not forget that the present government, whether we like it or not, is the elected government of our own choice. It is, therefore incumbent on us all to support it. Those who wish to effect certain reforms have every right to do so but they must proceed constitutionally. We must not resort to violence against our own government. That will create lawlessness and the most dangerous thing that can befall a people is anarchy. Let us all beware of it. I also appeal to my friends in the government to put into effect certain constructive schemes whereby the lot of the man may be considerably improved, for freedom has no meaning if the common man is not free from want. Let us also not forget that we have got an onerous duty towards those unfortunate millions who

have been uprooted by the partition of the country. To rehabilitate the refugees is the paramount duty of our government and I am sure Pandit Nehru and his colleagues will do all they can to satisfy the legitimate demands of the refugees.

There are talks of war. I do not believe war can do any good. India has always stood for peace and it is the policy of our government to remain neutral. We do not wish to attack any country nor do we wish to be enslaved by any foreign power. We do not believe in aggression, but we shall resist with all our might whosoever dares to cast an evil or covetous eye on our beloved motherland. Let us keep ourselves ready to defend our motherland whenever an emergency arises.

I once again thank you all and have to appeal to you to cultivate high character, firm faith and strong determination. These are the qualities which are needed today to preserve our hard-won freedom."

Appendix-II

Baba Kharak Singh : A Chronology

- 1868: Born on 6th June at Sialkot.
- 1885: Matriculated from Scot Mission School, Sialkot.
- 1889: Graduated among the first batch of students from the Panjab University, Lahore.
- 1912: Elected as the Chairman of the Reception Committee of the 5th Session of the Sikh Education Conference held at Sialkot.
- 1916: Presided over ninth Sikh Educational conference held at Tarn Taran.
- 1919: Central Sikh League inaugurated in the Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore.
- 1920: Elected President of SGPC (Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee).
- 1920: Presided the historic session of the Central Sikh League held in Lahore.

- 1920: A *Jatha* led by Baba Kharak Singh occupied Gurudwara Babe Di Ber, Sialkot, the native town of the Babaji.
- 1921: Elected President of the Central Sikh League with Sardul Singh Caveeshar as General Secretary.
- 1921: Unanimously re-elected as the President of Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee.
- 1921: Launched the famous *Chabian da Morcha* (Keys' Affair) against the government in November, 1921 for return of the keys of *Toshakhana* of the Golden Temple.
- 1922: Elected as the President of Panjab Provincial Congress Committee.
- 1922: Return of the keys of the *Toshakhana* to Baba Kharak Singh on 18 January.
- 1922: Mahatma Gandhi sends telegram to Babaji on 17/18 January for victory over the keys' affair.
- 1923: Jawaharlal Nehru, A. T. Gidwani and K. Santhanam arrested in Nabha in September for supporting the Akali struggle and sent to jail.
- 1925: Sikh Gurudwaras and Shrines Bill passed in the Punjab Legislative Council.
- 1926: While still in jail, unanimously elected President of the Gurudwara Central Board (later redesignated as Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee) constituted under the Sikh Gurudwaras Act, 1925.
- 1927: Despite the extreme cold weather conditions in the Dera Ghazi Khan jail, Babaji remained barebacked until he was unconditionally released on 4 June from the jail.

- 1928: All Parties Sikh Conference under the leadership of Baba Kharak Singh held on 30 January appealed the Sikhs to boycott the Simon Commission.
- 1928: Organized demonstrations against the visit of the Simon Commission to Lahore.
- 1929: Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Motilal Nehru and Dr. Ansari called on Babaji at Lahore in December to get his support in moving resolution for *Purna Swaraj*.
- 1931: Launched a *morcha* at Daska (District Sialkot, Pakistan)
- 1932: Re-arrested and detained for 19 months in prison.
- 1935: Taken in custody for his scathing criticism of the Communal Award.
- 1940: Again sent to jail for participating in Satyagraha movement.
- 1945: Took up the cause of the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose.
- 1946: Toured the whole of the Panjab and the N.W.F.P. and made a significant contribution to the success of the Congress in the election.
- 1947: Opposed the division of India on communal lines and criticized Lord Attlee's announcement about partition of India.
- 1948: Honoured in a public function in New Delhi by Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders.
- 1953: Presented *Abhinandan Granth* in a public function by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of India.
- 1963: Died on 6 October at the age of 95.

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